

Gene Ammons – Angel Eyes (1962)

Written by bluesever

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1. *Gettin' Around* 2. *Blue Room* 3. *You Got To My Head* 4. *Angel Eyes* 5. *Water Jug* 6. *It's The Talk Of The Town* Personnel: Gene Ammons (tenor saxophone); Frank Wess (tenor saxophone, flute); Mal Waldron (piano); Johnny "Hammond" Smith (organ); Doug Watkins, Wendell Marshall (bass); Arthur Taylor, Ed Thigpen (drums).

Gene Ammons' *Angel Eyes* leaves a nagging feeling that it was thrown together and dumped onto the marketplace with little or no thought. After all, when *Angel Eyes* was released in 1965, Ammons was in the middle of serving a long jail term for narcotics possession. These tunes are culled from two separate sessions, done in 1960 and 1962 respectively, featuring vastly different groups. So, not only does the album feature an outdated snapshot of Ammons' work as a jazz artist, it also features music that had lingered in the vaults for years.

Of course, these two reservations are nonsense when considering the way jazz record companies operated during the 1960s. Blue Note Records, for example, held off on releasing many recordings that, upon their release years and years later, have revealed few discernable flaws. In addition, just because an album contains music recorded by an artist years ago, that in no way should detract from the listener's enjoyment or its critical value.

The six songs on *Angel Eyes* can easily be broken into three up-tempo tracks and three ballads. The trio of light, subtle swingers feature a quintet of Ammons, Frank Wess on flute and tenor saxophone, organist Johnny "Hammond" Smith, bassist Doug Watkins and Art Taylor on drums. Soulful playing dominates these tunes with Ammons getting in a relaxed solo on "Gettin' Around" and Wess turning in a memorable flute improvisation on "Blue Room."

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The same band shows up on the title track and shifts gears from soul to melancholy. In his theme statement, Ammons makes the tune his own, turning the song into a bluesy lament. When he exhorts the listener to “drink up” and “order anything you see,” his saxophone becomes an instrument of beauty and with only a few choice notes conjures up a searing impression of sadness. Throughout the nine minutes of “Angel Eyes,” Ammons’ band creates an expert example of slow-motion ballad playing that perfectly fits the song’s lyrics and drips with pure, authentic emotion.

“You Go To My Head” and “It’s The Talk of the Town” pair Ammons up with a rhythm section featuring Mal Waldron on piano, bassist Wendell Marshall and Ed Thigpen on drums. Both are relatively straightforward ballads which concentrate on melody. The latter tune serves as an effective closer to the album, coming after the celebratory mood of “Water Jug,” and features a creative cadenza by Ammons.

Upon first glance, Angel Eyes may give the impression that it was hastily put together by Prestige, but the music inside brims with the enthusiasm and talent of jazz musicians creating music to be enjoyed and savoured for years and years to come. ---Robert Gilbert, allaboutjazz.com

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