Hank Mobley - Newark 1953 (2012)

CD1 *01 - Ow 02 - There's A Small Hotel 03 - Ballad Medley 04 - All The Things You Are 05 - Jumpin' With Symphony Sid* CD2 *01 - Announcements 02 - Lullaby Of Birdland 03 - Embraceable You 04 - Keen And Peachy 05 - Pennies From Heaven 06 - Blues Is Green 07 - 'S Wonderful* Hank Mobley - Sax (Tenor) Walter Davis, Jr. - Piano Bennie Green – Trombone Charlie Persip – Drums Jimmy Schenck - Bass

Recorded on one hard-swinging late-September evening at Newark's Piccadilly Club, the two-disc Hank Mobley set showcases the talented tenor saxophonist evolving into a major force, alongside the transitional and complicated piano stylings of Walter Davis Jr., the pungent trombone of elder statesman Bennie Green, Charli Persip's indefatigable drumming and the under-heard, under-acclaimed bass of Jimmy Schenck. While Mobley dominates, veteran Green is often more than a co-equal, sparkling on tracks such as "Ow!," the rowdy Dizzy Gillespie starter, and a long "Pennies From Heaven." "Ow!" jumps once Mobley double-times, curling lines over each other to accelerate the tune.

Recorded over three November nights at the Rising Sun, a Montreal jazz club, the single Dexter Gordon disc captures the commanding tenorman in full ballad prowess, setting his languorous inventions against the modernistic, rhapsodic clustering of pianist George Cables. Backed by bassist Rufus Reid and the little-known drummer Eddie Gladden, the Gordon set is debonair, continental and routinely gorgeous. The interplay between Gordon and Cables is a regular highlight here; both musicians are masters of cadenza, rulers of rubato, arbiters of arpeggio.

Both these offerings in Uptown's Flashback Series are memorable. Both capture singularly captivating performances; even the crowd chatter swings, particularly in the earthier, more uptempo Mobley package. The Mobley quintet plays music that bridges swing and bebop.

Grounded in then-contemporary jazz tunes like “Ow!,” George Shearing’s “Lullaby of Birdland” and Green’s frenetic, gospel-tinged “Blues Is Green,” Newark 1953 also nods to tradition with “Jumpin’ With Symphony Sid” (a signature song for King Pleasure, too) and a ballad medley distinguished by a rare Schenck solo on a brooding “Where or When.”

The bluesy Mobley drives the group, quoting everyone from Bizet to Bird. He unfurls chorus after chorus on “Pennies From Heaven,” spooling out impossibly quick and warm, ascending lines on “Blues Is Green” as audience members “yeah” along; at the same time, he can lay back, evoking the buttery Coleman Hawkins on “Darn That Dream.” Recorded by Ozzie Cadena, who would become an engineer and producer with Savoy and Prestige, Newark 1953 sheds light on a young Mobley who would shortly become a Jazz Messenger and two years later record his first Blue Note date as a leader.

The definitively mature Gordon recording is more leisurely and emotionally resonant. Take “Old Folks,” a highlight of this very fine disc. It starts with Gordon’s statement of the melody, his tenor shortly entwining with Reid’s stout and plummy bass. The tune swells as Cables’ piano splashes accumulate, Gladden’s brushwork sneaking in to shimmer in the background. Gordon’s tone is embracing, his inventiveness as effortless as his breath command.

No matter how wide Gordon’s sound, his intonation stays true-as does his expressiveness. No tricks here, just authority, and the musicians never lose track of the melody. Few players can blow engaging choruses for more than 10 minutes, as Gordon does here, finally ceding to Cables. The pianist steps in, arpeggio-drunk and cadenza-ready. Even though he piles up notes (especially in light of Gordon’s sparer, more spacious approach), Cables, too, holds the melody steady; the track is such a jaw-dropper, you can virtually hear the stunned silence of the Montreal crowd, which bursts into applause when Reid and Gladden join in, brightening the pace. Gordon returns to the tune almost 16 minutes in, briefly confident, even jaunty. But that’s a fake-out, a set-up for a burred series of cadenzas that takes out the tune with verve and dignity, Gordon loosening low notes, then squeezing out high ones, underlining the pathos and kindness at the core of that standard. “Old Folks” is only one of the four similarly expansive, singularly rich tracks that make up the core of this album. --- Carlo Wolff, jazztimes.com

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