

WALLACE DAVENPORT

DARKNESS ON THE DELTA—Fat's Cat's Jazz FCJ-122: *Darkness on the Delta; Sugar Babe; Melancholy; Just a Closer Walk With Thee; My Monday Date; Sleepy Time Down South; Someday You'll be Sorry; Chloe; When the Saints Go Marching In.*

Personnel: Davenport, trumpet, vocal; Walter (Slide) Harris, trombone; Herb Hall, clarinet; John Eaton, piano; Van Perry, bass; Freddie Moore, drums.

Rating: ★★★★★ / ★★★

Wallace Davenport was long overdue for his own album, and independent producer Johnson (Fat Cat) McRee had a potential coup on his hands in recording him. Regrettably, the results don't do full justice to a great trumpeter.

New Orleans-born, Davenport spent some 15 years on the road with the big bands of Lionel Hampton, Ray Charles, Lloyd Price and Count Basie, mostly as lead trumpeter and sometimes also as musical director. A couple of years ago, he decided to come home, and since then has found a berth on Bourbon Street, sometimes holding down two six-hour jobs per day—and Bourbon Street jobs are not designed for coasting.

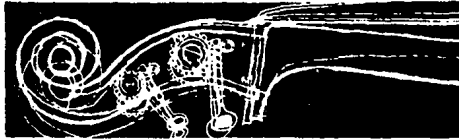
Davenport has the chops for such tasks, just as he had them for the big band lead chairs. He had only rare chances for solo exposure in those days, and now that he has plenty, it's within a traditional framework. But since he cut his musical eyeteeth with Papa Celestin and some of the top brass bands in New Orleans, he has no trouble with that.

There is no question that Davenport is a

trumpeter of the first rank. His pretty tone has the clarity and perfect projection of a skilled lead man's, but none of the coldness that sometimes goes with that skill. Concomitantly, he phrases with great percision but without stiffness. His technique is remarkable: the valves are like butter under his fingers, his range is awesome (but judiciously employed), his control is impeccable, his intonation flawless.

Davenport is also a fluent improviser, inspired by Louis Armstrong and also touched by Charlie Shavers, Sweets Edison, and, in his more modern moments, Clark Terry. But he is quite himself—a very classy trumpet player.

His only weakness, as I hear it, is an occa-



sional tendency to empty technical display that mars an otherwise tasteful conception (as the triple-tongue stuff at the end of the first *Monday Date* solo here). And there may be reason to doubt that the traditional context is truly what Davenport's soul lies within—I sense a great mainstream player at the core of his musical being.

This album was recorded during a playing visit to McRee's annual Manassas (Va.) Jazz Festival. Aside from the excellent clarinetist Herb Hall, Davenport's companions are notches below his level. Eaton is an accomplished, musicianly but stylistically bland pia-

nist not helped by a tinny-sounding instrument; Harris is a pleasant minor-league Vic Dickenson with, apparently, little lung power (or else he was consistently under-balanced by the engineer). Perry is rather inaudible and seems little more than steady, while veteran drummer Moore keeps time like a metronome, without a trace of shading or color.

The program, despite the warhorses, is nicely enough chosen, but the tempos and routines (or absence thereof) are monotonous and unimaginative. Ensemble, string of solos, ensemble, period—except on the two most effective tracks.

These are *Closer Walk*, a Davenport showpiece in which his Harmon-muted, stately-slow solo, accompanied only by brushes, is a highlight. The other, believe it or not, is *Saints*, which has some peppy vocalizing and patter by Davenport (he also sings on *Sugar Babe* and *Someday*, in that pleasant, rhythmic, relaxed manner characteristic of so many trumpeters inspired by Louis).

Trumpet-wise, Davenport's magnificent closing half chorus on *Sleepy Time* delivers clear proof of his true ability. Climbing to a punishing upper range, and staying there, he serves notice that he is a musician to be reckoned with.

Five stars for Davenport; a bare three for the setting (with Hall's warm, soulful work definitely an asset, and the shifting, unfocused recording balance a distracting detraction).

Davenport deserves much better, but this is a welcome start. With a little more help from his friends, he should raise quite a bit of hell.

—morgenstern

"Approach this music as the sixth musician."

Those were critic Michael Cuscuna's words about Weather Report in *The Listener*. So were these: "The empathy among these five men is awesome and thrilling . . ."

That should give you some idea of the group's tightness. And their new album's already been praised by Frank Zappa and Duke Ellington. Zappa said, "I find it excellent and beautiful." And Ellington commented, ". . . when I encountered Weather Report, and learned

that Joe Zawinul was in it, I paid attention. What I heard confirmed my opinion that if the word 'jazz' means anything at all, it means freedom of expression."

Weather Report does draw on the freedom and inventiveness of jazz. It's also got plenty of the electricity and force of rock. As Mark von Lehman wrote in the *New York Herald*, "Weather Report has developed a collective musical voice of its own."

Weather Report: When you approach them as a sixth musician, you'll find out how much new music you have in you.

Weather Report. "I Sing the Body Electric"
On Columbia Records and Tapes

