

record REVIEWS

CLEARING THE AIR

RAY BRYANT

RAY BRYANT MCMLXX—Atlantic SD 1564: *Stick With It; Let It Be; Bridge Over Troubled Waters; Hey Jude; Shake-A-Lady; Unchained Melody; My Cherie Amour; Spinning Wheel.*

Personnel: Bryant, piano; Chuck Rainey, electric bass; Jimmy Johnson, drums, augmented on first three tracks by woodwinds and strings, on fourth track by trumpet, trombone, and saxes, arranged by Arif Mardin.

Rating: ★★★

JUNIOR MANCE

WITH A LOTTA HELP FROM MY FRIENDS—Atlantic SD 1562: *Thank You Falletin Me Be Mice Elf Again; Never Say Naw; Don't Rush Us; Well I'll Be White Black; Home Groovin'; Spinning Wheel; Don't Cha Hear Me Callin' To Ya?*

Personnel: Mance, piano; Eric Gale, guitar; Chuck Rainey, electric bass; Billy Cobham, drums.

Rating: ★★★½

Is art divisible from life—should it be? But what is life in 1970? Indeed, what is art?

Don't wince. My tongue is in my cheek. Or is it? Everything is ambiguous these days. Take record reviewing, the record business, record reviewers, readers of record reviews, and jazz.

Most records made by jazz artists these days are pretty much like the two under scrutiny here, in one way or another. That is to say, they are not "pure" jazz albums, but attempts to present players usually identified with jazz in terms considered compatible with what is called "today's music."

Which means: tunes, rhythms, and areas of sound bought by today's record public. More specifically, hits of the day or blues/soul/rock-flavored melodies, played with a pronounced beat, usually in some variant of contemporary dance rhythm and tempo, often using an organ and/or electronically flavored instrumentation, with sometime additives including strings, brass riffs, or vocal backing, and generally within airplay length.

More and more such records are among the fewer and fewer albums made by jazz players these days, and it ain't likely to subside, this trend. For one thing, it sells records, at least sometimes. For another, it seeks and finds its audience not among dedicated jazz followers but among people who buy records for fun—listening at home with a groove going, dancing at parties—and there's more of the latter, friend—plenty more.

Remember when even people who didn't care about or particularly liked jazz had at least a few Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck, Chet Baker or Stan Getz records at home—and later maybe a Cannonball or Ram-

Records are reviewed by Chris Albertson, Mike Bourne, Bill Cole, Don DeMicheal, Alan Heineman, Wayne Jones, Larry Kart, John Litweiler, John McDonough, Don Morgenstern, Don Nelsen, Harvey Pekar, Doug Ramsey, Harvey Siders, Carol Sloane, and Jim Szantor.

Reviews are signed by the writers.

Ratings are: ★★★★★ excellent, ★★★★ very good, ★★★ good, ★★ fair, ★ poor.

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sey Lewis? No room here to go into why, but that fringe bought a lot of records. That fringe is gone.

The jazz fringe audience today maybe buys Miles—right now, anyway. It buys blues—phony and real, new and reissued. It probably buys a token Coltrane LP, perhaps a Billie Holiday. The rest is rock—and maybe some sides like these. Especially if the buyers are into black culture—not the kind you hear demands made for, but the kind that exists because there is demand for it.

The records we're talking about are bought by people whose libraries also include James Brown, Aretha, King Curtis, Ray Charles oldies, and, if they're hip, some contemporary blues, like B. B. King. There are a lot of people out there like that, and they buy a lot of records.

Now, people who review records for this magazine are, in varying degrees, serious about jazz. They may like some contemporary popular music, and even praise it, but they don't much like records like the ones we're talking about. Why? Because they are conditioned to think of jazz musicians as "artists" who, if they are not playing "pure" jazz of one sort or another, must be suspected of compromising their talents. Either they've sold out, or they're being pressured by the record companies, or maybe they were not "real" artists to begin with, the argument goes.

The reviewers also feel, and with good reason, that they are writing for people who want their jazz straight and are likely to share these prejudices against "commercialism."

There certainly are standpoints from which such attitudes are justified: personal esthetics, high artistic standards, notions of a grander design. But is art divisible from life? Are such concepts not perhaps too idealistic and insufficiently realistic when applied to jazz in the marketplace?

Not to say that commercialism is good enough for jazz because jazz isn't on that high a level anyway. Not in the least. But to say that the music in its highest forms could never have survived—not even have come into being—if not for the existence of an environment in which fine distinctions between art and entertainment were not commonly made, or even relevant.

The reviewers who put down today's commercial jazz are almost all in greater or lesser awe of the music's legacy, as handed down on records. Until the late 1930s, however, not one single jazz record was made to sell as art, or even as jazz. Some of the most beautiful jazz records ever cut were quite simply made for en-

tertainment—for dancing, for casual listening, as versions of hit tunes.

How many lovers of jazz now remember that working in even the best big bands of the swing era (Ellington and a very few others excluded) meant, for the dedicated jazz player, a compromise with his true ambitions, and that the romantic jazz fans of that day much admired those "fugitives" from the big bands who played "the real jazz" for peanuts in the few joints that would book it? (In retrospect, the ones who didn't flee were not necessarily less dedicated.)

And you don't even need history to make the point: how many of the "pure" jazz albums of the past decade were made by players who, for daily bread, played all kinds of "commercial" music?

The point is: jazz is a music, but is also a way of playing, and it has always been fascinating to see how adaptable to a variety of playing situations jazz musicians have been. Even Thelonious Monk used to play for dances and revival meetings. That he doesn't have to do that now is only as it should be. That not every jazzman, not even every great jazzman, can always write his own musical ticket is not as it should be—but if we lived in a perfect world, who'd need record reviews?

Compromise with the necessities of life does not always inhibit artists. Indeed, no artist was really free to create as he pleased until art became a luxury—and you only need to visit your nearest gallery of contemporary art to see how much that has improved matters.

It goes against the intellectual's grain, no doubt, but isn't it one of the great achievements of jazz that it has been an intrinsic part of popular music, first in this country and soon elsewhere as well, for five decades or more? Despite the fact that it is an art, or because it is? Ponder that, and ask yourself if it isn't a measure of a musician's strength and identity as an artist that he can make silk purses out of sow's ears, and if it isn't an axiom that if you have something of your own to say, it will come through no matter what? If you can play, there are many ways to play yourself. And who the hell says that "art" must always be pure and holy and profound? Me, I'd rather tap my foot to some soul jazz, organs, electric bass and all, then be hectored by some no-blowing poseur's naked egotrip. One may be a commercial copout, the other serious art—but don't bet on it. These are ambiguous times.

These two survival albums by jazz players, aimed at the non-purist market, don't

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pretend to be what they are not, and contain nothing that the two fine pianists involved have to be ashamed of, or be put down for by people who don't offer them viable alternatives along with criticism.

Speaking as a long-time enjoyer of both these men's music, I admit I wouldn't trade my Bryant Prestiges or my Mance Riversides (or his gas of a debut album on Verve) for these new entries, but I hope they both sell like hotcakes.

And if I were throwing a party and wanted people to dance and have a good time, I'd put these on—not the others. Later on, I might get into something heavier, but these—especially Junior's—would break the ice and make no non-jazz freak feel left out.

Mance's album has the advantage of an unalloyed quartet format; it's straight ahead and simple most of the way. It gets a groove and keeps it; maybe it isn't a jazz groove, but *Home Groovin'* is as good a blues piano performance as has been put on wax in some time—the way back blues dressed up for today.

Gale's wa-wa touches don't offend me, except on the over-done opening track, and he instantly redeems himself on Percy Mayfield's s-l-o-w, funky *Never Say Naw*, on which Junior has the message.

If there isn't much here of Junior Mance, the brilliant, swinging jazz pianist, there is a whole lot of Junior Mance, the hip and groovy blues/rock pianist—and that's not bad at all, chum.

Cobham, a fine young jazz drummer who has great versatility to his credit, and Rainey, who not for no reason seems to own the electric bass concession at Atlantic, work well with Mance—Cobham has been with him live, and they can cook up a swinging storm together.

The cooking here is not like that, but if you're not averse to varying your diet (a hamhock can cut a chateaubriand at times), go ahead and have some fun with Junior here. And remember, if he does well with this, they might let him loose some other time. As opposed to Ramsey Lewis et al., this is honest music—a jazz solution.

Ray Bryant is not as spontaneous a blues player as Junior—and then he's got those arrangements to contend with on side 1—strings and woodwinds on three tracks, brass and reeds on the fourth. Also, he is playing a repertoire mostly of pop tunes.

But it's good to hear his playing so well recorded, and to hear his musicianly touches, which often seem to point up the banality of the string scoring—not demonstratively, but just by being real. (You never get such conflict with schlock players.)

On the trio side, he makes *Spinning Wheel* groove even more than Junior's version, perhaps because the tempo is more down. His playing throughout is full-bodied and two-handed; the big sound he gets from a piano is a pleasure in itself.

Let It Be has a long rubato opening, supported by softly bowed bass (don't tell me that's an electric instrument) which is a highlight of the album. Into tempo, Bryant displays those plunging bass passages that are an earmark of his style,

with a touch that keeps the notes free of crashes or distortions. The other Beatles tune is not as successful; *Hey Jude* is a piece you really have to get into, and I don't think Ray did, except for a moment when the background lays out. But he makes a soul hymn out of *Bridge*.

I don't know if this Jimmy Johnson is the same fine drummer who was with Duke Ellington in 1959, but he was from Philly, like Ray is, so it might be. Whatever, he does well, and Rainey is never overly obtrusive—a credit to the engineer as well as to himself.

I hope this album sells, too. And that Atlantic will do right by Ray Bryant. Both he and Junior have paid plenty of jazz dues. They don't have to prove anything to me. Let it be.
—Morgenstern

JULIAN DASH

A PORTRAIT OF JULIAN DASH—Master Jazz Recordings, Inc. MJR 8106: *Two Shades of Blue*; *Tuxedo Junction*; *Willow Weep for Me*; *Julian's Dash*; *Don't Blame Me*; *Take the "A" Train*.

Personnel: Dash, tenor; Jimmy Shirley, guitar; Milt Hinton, bass; Cliff Smalls, piano; George Foster, drums.

Rating: ★★☆☆½

Julian Dash's name will probably not be familiar to many listeners, but to pass over this record because the name doesn't ring a bell would be serious mistake for those who like their music crisp, clean, and swinging.

Most of Dash's professional career was spent in the ranks of the Erskine Hawkins band; he is also remembered for the tenor work he contributed to the famous series of Buck Clayton jam sessions for Columbia in the mid-1950s (CL 548, 567, 614). Following those gigs he went virtually unrecorded until he was summoned by MJR to a Jimmy Rushing session (MJR 8104) in October 1967 which produced six magnificent sides.

Now he comes back to MJR for another workout, this with only rhythm backing, and the results are a fine tribute to an excellent talent.

Dash has a light, airy (but not breathy) tone short of the translucent sound of the Lester Young style. He draws upon the Lesterian tradition for certain accents such as chewing on one note for several bars, but taken as a whole, his style seems to have been more influenced by Chu Berry. Not that he sounds like either one of these men; Dash is a stylist easily identifiable on his own merits.

Julian's Dash is an up-tempo original improvisation based on a 32-bar chorus form with release. Dash's attack presses on with unflinching swing, and his lines sparkle with coherent and arresting ideas. Guitarist Jimmy Shirley provides a strong boost to the rhythm section when playing rhythm figures and provides a rich background of chords to Dash's playing.

Blame is a fine ballad featuring only Dash and Milt Hinton's bass. Hinton takes a bowed solo first and then goes pizzicato. It's the least successful track on the LP, and comes off as somewhat colorless. A more workable duet concept pairs Dash and Shirley in *Blue*, with beautiful results, especially Shirley's full-bodied solo.

A Train and *Tuxedo* are medium tempo

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