

JazzNights 27

Mr. Stetch first studied classical saxophone, and only turned to the piano at the advanced age of 18. Born in Edmonton, he moved to Montreal, then New York, and over the years has been the recipient of numerous awards, fellowships, and commissions. He's an especially accomplished composer, finishing second in the 1993 Thelonious Monk composers competition. He travels the US and world jazz scene and played here in September, 2006 (*JazzNights* 17). We are delighted that he'll return to JazzNights this May.

I first heard Mr. Stetch at the 1999 Monk piano competition semifinals. What a great group that was! In addition to Mr. Stetch, it included Eric Lewis, Orrin Evans (*JazzNights* 14), Jeb Patton, Helen Sung (*JazzNights* 22), Sam Yahel, all of whom are carving fine careers on the New York scene and beyond. I was greatly taken with Mr. Stetch's work at the time: to the extent that I can read my old notes, I thought he was "cerebral, brilliant, and varied." My admiration has only grown with time.

Of course, solo piano has a long tradition in jazz, and there have been some remarkable artists who made much of this demanding, highly exposed, "without a net" style. The best at solo work was Art Tatum, arguably the greatest of all jazz pianists. Mr. Tatum comes from James P. Johnson and Fats Waller and leads directly to Bud Powell and through him to literally everyone playing jazz piano today. Mr. Waller's comment on seeing Mr. Tatum enter a club was, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I play piano, but God is in the house tonight!" Quite so. These days, solo work is a rather rarely heard style, although Keith Jarrett, Brad Mehldau and, of late, Fred Hersch (*JazzNights* 5) are outstanding exceptions. Probably the best way to indulge a taste for solo piano is to buy all the "Maybeck Hall" series on Concord, but I want to recommend two three-CD collections that I think exemplify the best of contemporary solo playing. One was a compilation by Fred Hersch on Nonesuch, "Songs Without Words." The three CDs were devoted to Cole Porter tunes, "Jazz Tunes," and compositions by Hersch. In fact, there are occasional trio and quintet tunes on these CDs, but the vast majority of the time is devoted to solo playing. It is a marvelous collection, and was built upon in Mr. Hersch's much noticed solo week at the Village Vanguard in 2005. Highly recommended.

The other example is by John Stetch. In contrast to the Hersch efforts, these works were released in series, one a year over 2002-2004. Because they appeared seriatim, they did not seem to be taken as a collective statement. Nonetheless, they are exactly that, and a strong collection it is. These recordings deserve much more notice as a whole than they have been given. There are similarities, if not in style, in organization to Hersch's "Songs Without Words." The first of Stetch's remarkable trilogy was "Ukrainianism," a collection of nine Stetch compositions based on Ukrainian folk themes. It was quickly followed by

the self-explanatory "Standards," and "Exponentially Monk," thirteen Stetch takes on songs composed by Thelonious Monk. Thus, the pattern of "Songs Without Words," is closely approximated.

The arrival of these CDs makes a strong case that Stetch is one of the best, and surely one of the most individual of today's pianists. There is not only virtuosity and lyricism here, but also great variety and chance taking of a very high order. Parts of "Ukrainianism" sound to me much like Bartok takes on Eastern European folk tunes. The standards on "Standards" are standards, but at least half are closely associated with Charlie Parker. Take a listen to Stetch's short version of Jerome Kern's "All the Things You Are." This Parker-defined, bopper's favorite is turned on its head in Stetch's hands - the normally ascending phrases descend, and the traditional slightly other worldly introduction is completely absent - until the very last bars where it appears as the terminal fragment. Another of Bird's favorite ballads, "Out of Nowhere," takes a brief trip to the Caribbean, a treatment I've never heard by anyone else. Similarly, although Monk's tunes on "Exponentially Monk" retain their Monkishness, Stetch's personality is strongly evident as well. Familiar Monk tunes are here - Monk's Mood, Blue Monk, 'Round Midnight, Evidence - but wonderful, less often heard tunes also appear - Green Chimneys, Gallop's Gallop, and Think of One. As on all of his solo CD's, Stetch expands the piano's sound palette by often playing inside, and with occasional prepared piano effects. These techniques also allow Stetch to bring to these solo performances rhythmic effects that might seem to be the province only of the classic jazz piano/bass/drums trio. He's not quite a "one man band" but it is sometimes close! For an example of what I mean, listen to "Well, You Needn't" on the Monk CD. All three of these CDs are excellent, and, in my view, "Exponentially Monk" is one of the strongest CDs of recent years.

Of course, Mr. Stetch is not only a solo performer. Recently, he's been appearing with a trio including the wonderful bassist Sean Smith (*JazzNights 1*), and Rodney Green on drums. By the way, Mr. Green plays *everywhere* these days and you'll hear much more from this fine young drummer. This trio has a new recording released in 2006 on Justin-time, "Bruxin' " and it's well worth checking out.

By the way, Mr. Stetch's CDs are exquisitely produced, with excellent cover art, often (always?) by Mr. Stetch himself, and inside photographs by Susan Higgenbotham.

Here are some CD suggestions:

Tatum: God is in the House, HighNote HCD 7030. Location recordings. Fidelity poor, music splendid.

Waller: The Joint is Jumpin', Bluebird 6288-2-RB (mostly solo, some groups).

Powell: The Amazing Bud Powell, Vols 1 and 2. Blue Note CDP 7 81504 1, CDP 7 81504 2. Indispensable.

Hersch: Songs Without Words, Nonesuch 79612.

Stetch Solo: Ukrainianism, Justin-Time JUST 187-2, Standards, Justin Time, JUST 190-2, Exponentially Monk, Justin Time, JUST 206-2.

Stetch Trio: Bruxin', Justin Time, JTR 8525-2.

Mr. Stetch's work can also be heard - and some downloaded - from his website:

<http://www.johnstetch.com/>