

Satin Doll (A Tribute to Billy Strayhorn)

Peter Madsen (Playscape)

Plays Ellington and Strayhorn

Alessio Menconi Trio (abeat)

Lovesome (Nancy Valentine Sings the Music of Billy Strayhorn)

Nancy Valentine (Jazz Garden)

by Scott Yanow

During his life, Billy Strayhorn, who died 50 years ago this month from cancer at 51, was a bit of an invisible man. One of the top composers and arrangers of the 20th century, Strayhorn spent much of his career in the shadow of his main employer Duke Ellington. While Ellington always acknowledged that Strayhorn composed his theme "Take The 'A' Train", some Strayhorn songs (including "Satin Doll") were often credited by others to Ellington since it was he that had made them famous. A gay black man, Strayhorn kept a low profile throughout his life and his accomplishments were not fully recognized until decades after his death. Can one think of a single full-length tribute album made during his lifetime?

The three CDs covered here are very different types of tributes. Particularly intriguing is *Satin Doll*, a set of ten Billy Strayhorn compositions performed as duets by pianist Peter Madsen and guitarist Oliver Rath. Rather than interpret the Strayhorn standards the same way as virtually everyone else, Madsen and Rath often use the melodies as frames of reference.

They modernize and reharmonize the songs and, in some cases, launch into a one-chord vamp or sound explorations only connected with the piece in a very abstract manner. For example, the title track includes the melody but the tone colors generated during the interplay let one know that there is a lot more to this satin doll than one expects. "Passion Flower" starts out as an out-of-tempo guitar solo before becoming a 5/4 romp worthy of Keith Jarrett. While "Day Dream" and "A Flower Is A Lovesome Thing" are a little more straightforward, "Take The 'A' Train" has Rath playing avant-blues slide guitar. A rambunctious "Johnny Come Lately" more or less keeps the original chord changes while utilizing a witty two-beat feel hinting at stride piano. "Blood Count" is quite melancholy, "Chelsea Bridge" is taken uptempo in 7/4 time and "Isfahan" is also played at a faster pace than usual. Only the closing "Lotus Blossom", Strayhorn's most beautiful melody, played tastefully by Madsen solo, is performed in a manner similar to Ellington.

Alessio Menconi's *Plays Ellington and Strayhorn* is quite worthy on its own terms. The three Italians (guitarist Menconi, organ player Alberto Gurrisi and drummer Alessandro Minetto) sometimes hint at earlier soul jazz players such as Grant Green and Jimmy Smith and Menconi in his liner notes recalls the early inspiration of a Wes Montgomery organ trio album from 1959. However, the players display their own musical personality within this context and the music avoids being predictable.

The trio performs three Duke Ellington songs (if one counts "Caravan", which was mostly composed by Juan Tizol), one by Mercer Ellington ("Things Ain't What They Used To Be", mistakenly credited to his father) and five by Strayhorn. The music swings, the highlights including a cooking rendition of "U.M.M.G. (Upper Manhattan Medical Group)", blazing "It Don't Mean A Thing", tasteful renditions of "Lush Life" and "Sophisticated Lady", "Day Dream" (taken in 5/4 time) and a lowdown "Things Ain't What They Used To Be". While it is true that most of Menconi's set could have been played in a similar fashion in the '60s, the musicians do not copy their predecessors and come up

with fresh ideas within the classic style.

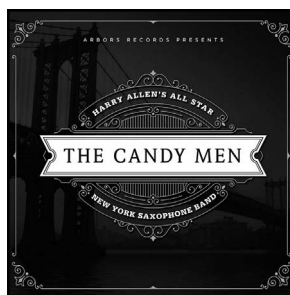
Nancy Valentine, a New York-based jazz singer who spent a period living in L.A., has a powerful voice, displays a very wide range close to Sarah Vaughan, scats with creativity and puts plenty of feeling and understanding into the lyrics that she interprets. She clearly loves the music of Billy Strayhorn and has been studying his compositions for quite a few years.

Valentine was first introduced to Strayhorn's music by pianist John di Martino, who showed her "A Flower Is A Lovesome Thing", which inspired the title track of this tribute album. Rather than focus on Strayhorn's best-known works, she interprets seven of his superior obscurities, two of his songs that became standards and three others, which, due to new lyrics, are retitled. Nine of the songs have Strayhorn's own lyrics, reminding us that his often-overlooked ability as a lyricist was one of the main reasons that Ellington originally hired him in 1939. Much of the material, some of which could be called art songs, is not too easy to perform but Valentine sounds relaxed and handles the occasional wide interval jumps effortlessly.

Utilizing three overlapping allstar groups and the arrangements of di Martino and Tamir Hendelman, these renditions of music often at least 70 years old sound modern and fresh. Tenor saxophonist Harry Allen is a major asset throughout, there are solos from trumpeters Joe Magnarelli (in fine form) and Dominick Farinacci and two from cornet player Warren Vaché (unfortunately muted) plus statements on "You're The One" from alto saxophonist Dick Oatts and baritone saxophonist Gary Smulyan.

But the main reason for this set's success is due to the singer. Whether it is a swinger such as "You Better Know It" (her scatting, rather than being anticlimactic after the horn solos, adds to the excitement) and "U.M.M.G. (Upper Manhattan Medical Group)", a charming Brazilian version of "Oo! You Make Me Tingle", dramatic version of "Blood Count" (retitled "My Flame Burns Blue") or heartfelt rendition of "Lotus Blossom (Thank You For Everything)", Valentine does Billy Strayhorn's music justice throughout *Lovesome*.

For more information, visit playscape-recordings.com, abeatrecords.com and nancyvalentinejazz.com



The Candy Men

Harry Allen's All Star New York Saxophone Band

(Arbors)

by Ken Dryden

A mainstream tenor saxophonist equally well versed in swing and bop repertoire, Harry Allen has developed a popular following during a career spanning nearly three decades. Allen has recorded prolifically for a number of labels but his latest Arbors release gave him the opportunity to write charts showcasing some of his favorite fellow New York-based saxophonists, with as much emphasis on tight, lively unison lines as individual solos. Fellow tenors Eric Alexander and Grant Stewart join Allen, along with the in-demand baritone saxophonist Gary Smulyan, frequent Allen collaborators pianist Rossano Sportiello and bassist Joel Forbes, plus drummer Kevin Kanner.

The sound of this band is inspired in part by the late '40s scores written for Woody Herman's "Four Brothers", though aside from Al Cohn's scoring of the Jimmy Giuffrè composition of the same name written

for that famous saxophone section, all of the arrangements are by Allen. The pieces come from several decades, mixing standards, show tunes, jazz classics and the leader's inspired originals.

His whimsical, sauntering composition "The One For You", co-written with pianist/lyricist/vocalist Judy Carmichael, could easily have been written as a theme for a '60s film or sitcom. Allen's sublime setting of Burton Lane-E.Y. Harburg's "How Are Things in Glocca Morra?" (from *Finian's Rainbow*) focuses on the lush harmonizing of the section. Allen's "Blues In The Morning" is a peppy swinger that would have been at home in Count Basie's playbook, buoyed by the contrast between the saxophonists' solos. The easygoing bossa nova "I Can See Forever" is another Allen-Carmichael collaboration, though the harder sound of Alexander, its featured soloist, gives this mellow ballad a bit of fire.

Leslie Bricusse-Anthony Newley's title track (from *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*) became a part of popular culture via Sammy Davis, Jr.'s 1972 recording and it remains relevant today, showcasing the warm unison blend of the saxophones and economical, swinging solos by Sportiello and the leader. Allen's composition "So There" is an intricate bop workout for the saxophonists, with numerous challenging twists, though they make it seem effortless.

With this outstanding release Harry Allen has shown a respect for past greats while creating fresh music likely to stand the test of time just as well.

For more information, visit arborsrecords.com. Allen is at Tribeca Performing Arts Center May 4th as part of *Highlights in Jazz*, Jazz at Kitano May 12th as a leader and May 13th with Nancy Marano and Blue Note May 14th with Marlene VerPlanck. See Calendar.

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