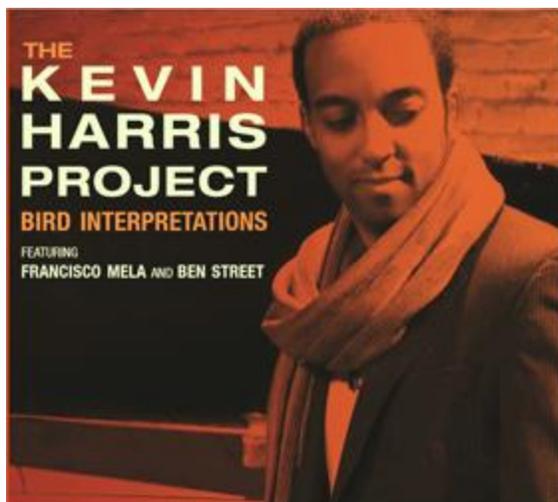


The Kevin Harris Project: Bird Interpretations

By Raul da Gama - Nov 16, 2015

Of all the great composers, musicians and instrumentalists Charlie Parker has had to contend with more brickbats – at least in his formative years – than most. Then when he fell into that time-warp called Bebop he finally scotched one and for all that he couldn't play and orchestrate music effectively once and for all. His genius exploded upon our musical, indeed our entire universe and although he's been long gone, his music seems to have not gone anywhere. At least not the adoration and influence it continues to have on musicians, both established and up-and-coming. I continue to refer to Heiner Stadler's great (and I choose my words with caution) record, *Tribute to Monk and Bird* (Tomato, 1976/Labor, 2012). It is one of those landmark recordings of how and what Charlie 'Bird' Parker might influence and be interpreted/influence a musician of the rare genius of Mr. Stadler. Among the younger generation, the alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa produced a work of great ingenuity *Bird Calls* (ACT, 2014). And now there is this from the exceptionally gifted young pianist, Kevin Harris: *Bird Interpretations*.



The title of the record might seem a bit prosaic, but the music is anything but, being re-imagined, sketched and played at his usual white-hot pace together with bassist Ben Street and drummer Francesco Mela. You will hear the melodies if you are a dyed-in-the-wool Bird-watcher, but that is about all. Mr. Harris has chopped up everything else. His own re-harmonisations are completely pruned away from Bird's and the rhythms – these have been dramatically and dynamically re-set to follow the inner machinations of Kevin Harris' mind. And what a brilliantly fertile mind it is. I can find but a few (if at all) words to describe his genius. The greatness of this work seems to mark the furthest limits attained by human art and the imagination (since Mr. Stadler's work that is). Rather than being daunted by Bird's own

greatness and his musical achievement, Kevin Harris seems to have been geared up by them and thus he set out to mark his own understanding of this great material with some of the finest re-writing ever done.

Kevin Harris set the bar very high with his astoundingly fresh, supple readings of such familiar works as Moose The Mooche, Donna Lee and Now's The Time as well as some rarities – Segment, Ko Ko and Chi Chi. I would be hugely surprised if these and the rest of the remarkable music on this record is not recognised by much admiration from serious fans and critics of Charlie Parker's music. I will also be

surprised if this record does not garner a clutch of awards in recognition of what it has achieved. Let me further suggest that Bird has been re-sculpted; that is, an absolutely new monument has been made to his legacy by Kevin Harris' musical project. Masterfully crafted music such as this is made once in a lifetime. The Kevin Harris Project tend to play up the extremes in the music still more in the ferbrile Bebop idiom that Bird created, in both the familiar charts as well as in those that Bird did not play often. All of the music has been played with its exquisite gradations of dynamic and timbre. And absolutely nothing has been lost by relocating the music from the wail of Bird's alto saxophone to the more temperate landscape of the piano. They are all beautifully managed – sustained with clarity of counterpoint, pointing up the individuality of not only Kevin Harris but also Mr Mela and Mr Street as well as their collective finesse.

More than that, the music also breaks free of the Bebop idiom before giving way to the lolloping rhythms that Kevin Harris has himself invented. The ambiguity of mood is superbly conveyed and overall the musical tribute is very much in keeping with their vision of the music as well as the original Bird changes. Kevin Harris is not afraid of using *portamento* either, applied with particular elegance to the entwining melody that opens Bloomdido, for instance, which is here encased in warmly voluptuous sound. But beauty is never at the cost of musical direction and a sense of the pacing of The Project as a whole. That and their ability to manage Bird's crazy rhythms capturing its darting, ferbrile quality with precision and grace is something to behold. And all of the music is, of course, a superbly adrenalin-charged affair. These are performances make you fall in love not only with Charlie Parker's music but with music in general all over again.

Track List: Crazeology; My Little Suede Shoes; Moose the Mooche; Segment; Ko Ko; Now's the Time; Chi Chi; Donna Lee; Bloomdido.

Personnel: Kevin Harris: piano; Francisco Mela: drums; Ben Street: bass.

Label: Independent

Release date: October 2015

Website: kevinharrisproject.com

Running time: 43:36