

A JEWEL TODAY

Steve Grover Trio – BREATH
Invisible Music IM-2029 (2003)

One of the most interesting facets about the CD-reissue boom of the past decade is discovering that the good-old-days weren't uniformly good. The music of the Golden Age of Jazz – whatever particular shade of gold you may favor – is available to us as never before. The bottom line is that back in the day, there were a lot of mediocre albums amid those few desert-island platters.

The same holds true today. Maybe there are more jazz labels than ever, perhaps more players can get their music in front of the world than in the past, but I haven't found an increase in jazz discs that really make a difference. Breath does. I've heard it a dozen times, and it still grabs me by the toes and knocks me flat.

Across twenty-plus years, Steve Grover has honed his compositional approach to a razor's edge. At this point, Grover is not trafficking in tricky arrangements, catchy riffs, mood-altering modulations or the challenge of the day, mixed-meters. He can; he has done so successfully in the past; he doubtless will again. But this CD shows nothing more and nothing less than acute songwriting showcased by quiet, fiery playing.

Breath achieves its excitement the hard way. Tension is built into melodic compositions and wound into provocative improvisations. It's clear that Grover and his longtime accomplices – Chris Van Voorst Van Beest on double-bass and Frank Carlberg on piano – are bound tight enough to guide each other along the narrow path of focused, energetic quietude. This is an ensemble which avoids the quagmire of somnambulance, on the one hand, and the shoals of relentless exclamation on the other.

Some measure of credit must go to engineer Peter Kontrimas. The dynamics on Breath come from the band, not from the control-room, but it takes a steady hand to capture them nevertheless. The resulting product displays every nuance Carlberg delivered to the keyboard and highlights the sharp stick-tones of Grover's ride cymbal (here, a timbre reminiscent of Jack DeJohnette's instruments). The full range of tones guest tenor saxophonist Andrew Rathbun wrings from his horn on "Portrait #4" appear with startling clarity. And Kontrimas, reputedly a fine jazz bassist, appears to have enjoyed portraying a full yet clear double-bass tone. The younger Van Voorst delivers a performance which shows a daunting level of imagination and precision.

If there is one criticism to be made of the Breath artifact it would lie in the packaging. The design is an attractive three-layer screen, but the actual sleeve is bare cardboard. Rumor has it that Grover chose the cheaper cover to keep the retail price of the disc down. If so, he is to be commended for his desire to treat his audience thoughtfully, but the final effect fails to fully reflect the musical quality of the disc.

In a perfect world Breath would have a place on the national "best-of" lists this year. Fortunately, we can put it on our own.