

THE ONES GONE BY

By Sam Sherry

This occasional column looks back at important or tasty discs which may have slipped below the radar or fallen off your shelf.

The Bob Brookmeyer Small Band: *Live at Sandy's*, Heritage Jazz 523028L (CD 1992); Gryphon G-2-785 (LP 1978)

What if a tree fell in the woods, and no-one heard? More to the point, what if, for one weekend, four White Guys With Ties wrote the book about how play jazz that balances drive with subtlety, improvisational joy with compositional intelligence, self-awareness with musical wit — and what if the record was released on the You'll Never Hear About It label? Well, that happened this time. For better and for worse, twenty-five years later, this disc still is news.

It's an easy thing to place Bob Brookmeyer among the top five valve-trombonists in jazz — try to think of five more, eh? Brookmeyer had a decent chunk of the jazz world by the string in the 1960s. He worked and recorded with Gerry Mulligan, Clark Terry, Stan Getz, and Thad & Mel, and he even made a piano duo record with Bill Evans. Then it all went down a bottle for about ten years. As his fiftieth year approached, in 1978 Brookmeyer decided to put it back together.

Brookmeyer latched onto a rhythm section about fifteen years his junior. Guitarist Jack Wilkins caught his break with the Buddy Rich band — not an ensemble known for an excess of delicacy, but a proving ground for those who could put up with whatever it took and swing for the fences. Wilkins' frequent partner, bassist Michael Moore, had satisfied such diverse employers as Freddie Hubbard, Bill Evans and Benny Goodman. Drummer Pat LaBarbera was a solid session-player and also known for work with his brother Joe, Elvin Jones' tenor-player at the time.

In July, 1978, the group decamped to Beverly, Massachusetts for a weekend gig. They were promptly ripped off at the hotel. Fortunately, their instruments remained in place. The performance was professionally-captured by a full remote recording truck, and the record speaks for itself.

It's telling that, on the original release, Brookmeyer called his band a "small ensemble" rather than a "quartet." Most jazz quartet songs follow this road-map: 'All four play. Then the rhythm trio plays. Then the bass player solos without much back-up. Then the drummer plays alone. Then all four players take the tune out.' Much of the magic of *Live at Sandy's* springs from the way that the Small Ensemble purposely eschews the hoary formula. There are some stellar bass-and-trombone duets — the duet on Brookmeyer's "Bad Agnes" is a textbook example of modern two-beat playing. There's gorgeous guitar-and-trombone duo-playing, too: When Wilkins strums — not 'chunks' four, but actually turns down the pickup and strums — behind Brookmeyer on "So Nice To Come Home To," you never miss a band. It is this conscious yet entirely organic use of every timbre which the band has to offer which make the three- and four-piece moments so powerful.

Ultimately, the thing which most distinguishes this record is that every one of these players has chops to burn, but each player restrains those chops to better serve the music. Brookmeyer plays with the energy of a man trying to catch up on a lost decade, tempered by the good taste which thirty years' professional experience brings. Wilkins' playing covers the full range of un-effected jazz guitar, from delicate finger-style work to full-bore, "outta-my-way" jazz shredding. And over the course of nearly two hours, Michael Moore stakes out the boundaries of a musical territory which most bass-players can see but never visit. Among bassists, Moore was and is known for extraordinary solos which are so melodic that it is simply impossible to focus on how difficult they are to play. Throughout this disc, Moore is at the top of his game: Tear- and grin-inducing melodies, impeccable intonation, orchestra-level bowing, smears and triplet-tricks, and straight walking time you can take to the bank.

Here's no surprise: *The Bob Brookmeyer Small Band* is only available by special-order or online. Take the time to find this double-disc, and reap the reward.