

## **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.*

Herbie Hancock: V.S.O.P., Columbia

Dexter Gordon: Homecoming, Columbia

This issue's column presents two progressive modern jazz albums from 1977 which helped swing the pendulum of publicity away from progressive modern jazz. These records were key items in the ascendancy of the "historical perspective" which came to dominate jazz criticism and jazz funding in the 80's and 90's.

First, some abbreviated background. Because jazz is a highly personal expression, and because the idiom changed and developed so rapidly, for most of the 20th century, a high premium was placed on innovation. During the mid-'80s and '90s that value was somewhat diminished as a more historical, conservationist approach gained critical approval.

In the mid-70's "jazz" encompassed several divergent gravity-points. There was the free-blowing "loft scene" spearheaded by Sam Rivers, Makanda Ken McIntyre and Anthony Braxton. The seeds of "soft jazz" from The Crusaders and Grover Washington, Jr. sold strongly. More aggressive electric fusion from John McLaughlin and Wayne Shorter's Weather Report was popular, particularly with younger guys.

The mainstream of jazz stood in the midst of it all. On the positive side, thoughtful artists such as Bobby Hutcherson were writing music which synthesized the grit and swing of the Jazz Messengers with the sophisticated compositional developments heralded by Chick Corea. On the other hand, bebop's founders were rarely heard from. New jazz sides from the 'young lions' of the 60's — say, Bill Hardman & Junior Cook, Bennie Golson, Tommy Flanagan, or Nat Adderly — were at best no big event, and at worst only available in Europe.

On June 29, 1976, Herbie Hancock put on an unprecedented concert event in New York, presenting for one night three of his great bands of the sixties and seventies on one bill. Hancock's Great Quintet — with Shorter, Freddie Hubbard, Ron Carter and Tony Williams — played a set focusing on *Maiden Voyage* and *Miles Smiles*. Hancock's revolutionary sextet played music from *Speak Like a Child* and *Mwandishi*. Last, Hancock's Headhunters showed where one chord, a backbeat and a musical genius' mind could travel. The resulting double-pocket album was called *V.S.O.P.*, and the record was a substantial event as well. Young musicians talked about how Hancock had "gone back to jazz" and purchase of the album was close to obligatory.

Six months later, in December, 1976, Dexter Gordon traveled from Scandinavia to play the Village Vanguard in New York. Gordon had long been a forward-looking player. In the 40's he was generally recognized as the first tenor-player to integrate the innovations Charles Parker. In

1960 he played on Hancock's debut as a leader. Gordon's work influenced players including Coltrane and Rollins, but he had spent nearly fifteen years based in Europe rather than live with the troubles American society imposed on Black men generally and jazz musicians in particular.

For his backup band Gordon chose one of the finest working ensembles on the progressive mainstream jazz scene. The Woody Shaw-Louis Hayes band balanced Shaw's compositional prowess and fiery trumpet-work with Hayes' towering groove. Pianist Ronnie Matthews was a highly-skilled journeyman, and bassist Stafford James could have written the book on low-frequency communication in the post-Ron Carter era.

Gordon featured his own fairly modern-sounding originals and modal pieces from Shaw and Matthews. But from the opening notes, the spotlight is on Gordon's virile tenor sound and quarter-century-deep groove pocket over standards like Jimmy Heath's "Gingerbread Man" and "Body & Soul." According to the notes, jazz fans circled the block seeking seats and the booking was extended twice. The resulting double-pocket, *Homecoming*, was also giant success. It re-established Gordon in the eyes of The Record-Buying Public and led to his move back to the U.S.

*Homecoming* and *V.S.O.P.* each present the music of the day. Hancock's liner notes say it clearly: "The idea was to bring the past up to date. [I wanted to] take the music we had played in the . . . sixties and let the music happen from our contemporary frames of mind." Both these records are modern jazz in the truest sense of the word. Ultimately, though, what made these records so influential was the fact that these jazz leaders were examining the music (as opposed to developing it). While the sides were not the very first evidence of the nascent shift of the pendulum, together, they added enormous momentum at a key moment.

*Homecoming* and *V.S.O.P.* can be appreciated on the historical level, and simply enjoyed as hard-driving testaments to the living end of a hard-blowing, forward-looking era.