

“Jazz Without Moment”

Miroslav Vitous: *Universal Syncopations*

ECM 1863 038 506-2

If musicians appear on a record without ever playing together, are they a band? If the music they improvise is recorded at different times by playing to a tape, is it “jazz?” These are the questions which underlie consideration of Miroslav Vitous’ new ECM release, *Universal Syncopations*.

The arc of the bassist’s career is a study in the power of the right idea at the wrong moment. On the strength of some New York City jam sessions, Mr. Vitous got the call to play with Roy Haynes on Chick Corea’s third solo album. The product was *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs*, the 1968 disc which moved Mr. Corea to leading-artist status as both player and composer. Mr. Vitous’ virtuostic if somewhat formulaic performance on that record earned him a solo turn the following year, *Mountain in the Clouds* for Atlantic. This fine disc featured a who’s who of the New York scene of the day, including such well-known players as John McLaughlin, Herbie Hancock and Jack DeJohnette. After a very brief visit with Miles Davis’ band, Mr. Vitous went on to form a new avant-garde free/electronic group with the saxophonist Wayne Shorter and keyboardist Josef Zawinul. The result is documented on Weather Report’s first record, *I Sing the Body Electric*. In fairly short order, though, the other two leaders decided to turn from astronomy (i.e. space exploration) to physics (through the mode of fusion). Mr. Vitous was gone, the band turned toward more formal compositions and the rest is history.

And so began the Mr. Vitous’ epic saga of ill-timing. By 1974 – just a little too late for Weather Report – he had heard loud and clear that fusion was the answer. He grew his hair, moved to Los Angeles and bought a double-neck bass/guitar. A series of bad jazz-rock records ensued, including the disco-infused *Magical Shepard* (an item on Top Ten Dumbest Cover lists for years). In 1981 – just a bit too early for the 80’s revival of jazz classicism – Mr. Vitous reunited with Chick Corea and Roy Haynes for a set of Thelonious Monk compositions. The trio failed to generate the sparks of youth, and Mr. Corea returned to bands featuring his own writing (and bassists such as Eddie Gomez and John Pattitucci). By the middle of the 1980’s – just before the explosion of jazz education in colleges around the US – Mr. Vitous had left his teaching position at the New England Conservatory of Music. He reportedly retreated to Bridgeport, Connecticut, not long before the city’s bankruptcy filing. After releasing five not-particularly-distinguished albums for ECM between 1979 and 1992, his career appeared to have effectively stalled.

All this forms the context for Mr. Vitous’ 2003 ECM release, *Universal Syncopations*. The names on the cover are as familiar as they are notable: Chick Corea, John McLaughlin, Jan Garbarek and Jack DeJohnette. However, even a cursory listening reveals a quality of hesitancy which rarely characterizes these famously-interactive performers. Mr. Corea and Mr. McLaughlin are justifiably-renowned, among other things, for their ceaseless generosity as accompanists, tossing out ideas which propel their colleagues to the highest realms. What makes them so quiet here?

The answer, Mr. Vitous tells [JazzTimes](#), is this: “The whole band never played together on any one piece. I basically laid down the foundation together with Jack [with] each recording his

contribution one by one and . . . it took 14 months of editing in the end to place everything exactly where I wanted.” In other words, Mr. Vitous still has enough good-will to interest leading improvisers in performing his compositions, but only at their own convenience. He no longer has what it takes – whether in cash or cachet we will never know – to make them carve time in their schedules to actually play with him. Rather than make, say, a trio record with Mr. Garbarek, Mr. Vitous decided to persevere with a digital pseudo-band and hope that listeners would perceive artificially-assembled juxtaposition as real-life interaction. The result is truly tragic as a reflection both of where he has arrived and what might have been.

Over the years there have been an endless series of efforts to define exactly “what is jazz,” most with an emphasis on the exclusionary rather than inclusive. The question Ornette Coleman posed in 1960, whether compositional structure is necessary to jazz, reverberated across the landscape at length before arriving at a resolution. Similarly, the question which Mr. Vitous’ erstwhile colleagues such Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock uttered around 1970 – whether music made with electric instruments is jazz – was, after great exploration, ultimately answered in the affirmative. To this day, players and writers argue relentlessly over whether swing is essential to jazz, whatever the shape or instrumentation involved.

Herbie Hancock’s recent discussion in the Portland Press-Herald provided an answer which best resonates for me: He says that the essential quality in jazz is risk itself. A piece by Thomas Conrad in the April, 2004 JazzTimes takes a similar position. Mr. Conrad alludes to “the quality of immediacy [which is ] essential to jazz. That quality originates, not from the assumption that the notes have never been played before, but from a sense that they have come into being, in real time, as urgent creative impulses.”

Ever since Les Paul invented multi-track recording musicians have struggled over exactly this point. Charles Mingus over-dubbed his bass part on *The Quintet Live at Massey Hall*, a set long hailed as “the greatest jazz concert ever.” Many of the finest jazz records have benefitted from the opportunity to fix a part which went slightly awry. (I’ve done the same on occasion, without regret and, I believe, without compromising the essential qualities in my music or my recording.) Even the drastic editing Teo Macero performed on Miles Davis’ *Bitches Brew* and *Jack Johnson* preserved the efforts of live players striving together, however much their work may have been chopped, stitched and formed into Mr. Macero’s creative quilt.

I am in no position to decide where the line should be drawn, if indeed there is only one answer to that question. But Mr. Vitous’ new record obliterates any pretense of toeing that line. The essential sense of urgency and immediacy is absent from *Universal Syncopations*. And so with good reason: It is unrealistic to expect even artists of the highest caliber to project those qualities when the working environment is suffused with the knowledge that every aspect of their playing will be adjusted to the boss’ satisfaction at a later time.

*Universal Syncopations* showcases fine compositions with echoes of many of the places which Mr. Vitous has visited in his lengthy career. However, as a performance record, the disc works better the closer it keeps to live interaction. From the first, the link between Mr. Vitous and his rhythm-partner Mr. DeJohnette on drums is strong, if drier than expected. The trios with Mr.

Garbarek sound fine. But with each expansion of the lineup, the pretense of interaction becomes exponentially more difficult to pull off.

*Universal Syncopations* has received some good reviews, but the more effusive focus on the strength of the roster and appear to have predated the news that these players did not work together in the conventional sense. Those who marvel at the quality of Mr. Vitous' compositions and the clarity of the recording on miss the point. Mr. Vitous and ECM have not sold this disc as an astoundingly high-quality compositional demo. They told us that this is was a "jazz date" when, in fact, there was no date at all. In the interactive, urgent, risky, improvisational music we call jazz, that makes all the difference.