

This delightful record brings together three very special ingredients: The musical legacy of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, the splendid Almost Big Band that keeps alive the special conception and spirit of Ernie Wilkins, and the marvelous clarinet of Putte Wickman, a grand master of his demanding instrument.

It is astonishing indeed that the happy occasion at which this music was captured took place just five days before Wickman's 80th birthday for he plays with the creative spirit and technical command of a man half his age--if with the experience and judgment that only age can bring. Thus he joins that cadre of octogenarian jazz masters that also includes Hank Jones, Clark Terry, Joe Wilder, Roy Haynes. Louis Bellson, and fellow clarinetist Buddy DeFranco. (Years ago, when I first started to write about jazz, I urged people to pay attention to what was then considered the old cats--players barely into their sixties.)

It is interesting that the most significant modern jazz clarinetist belong to the same generation (and of additional interest that two of them are Swedes): Jimmy Giuffre and Tony Scott (1921); the late Stan Hasselgard (1922); De Franco (1923) and Putte Wickman (1924). But that makes eminent sense: all were old enough to be inspired by Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw, and all were young enough to be captivated by Charlie Parker (and Dizzy Gillespie, to be sure, but the saxophone is closer to the clarinet than the trumpet).

Today, Giuffre (who had a unique conception but never was a great technician) is no longer active, Scott not heard from with any consistency (though he sounded fine when heard in New York in the summer of 2004, only one tooth left notwithstanding), De Franco the brilliant virtuoso still (he practices for hours every day to keep in shape), and Wickman, as I just noted, at the top of his form.

We have of course come a long way since the days when European jazz musicians were not fully recognized as equal to Americans--Django Reinhardt always excepted. But one still comes across funny statements, such as this one in the authoritative and quite recent Biographical Encyclopedica of Jazz, where Wickman's entry includes this nugget: Considered by many to be Sweden's foremost clarinetist. That's a perfect example of what we call "damning with faint praise." Not to say that there aren't other worthy Swedish clarinetists, but anyone with ears who has heard Wickman would change this to "considered by many to be one of the world's foremost clarinetists." And these many would include such different peers as De Franco and my dear friend Kenny Davern, whose style on the instrument is very different, but who knows what makes a clarinetist great.

As for myself, I've been a fan since hearing Wickman live, albeit just briefly, in New York in 1959, at a tribute to Sidney Bechet. I would hear him again, and again to briefly, in a night of Swedish jazz at Carnegie Hall in 1991, but in

between, I managed to collect quite a few albums featuring that wonderful horn, in a variety of settings. And no less a judge than John Lewis turned out to be a fan as well (and as can be heard on that fine Gazell trio CD of Wickman, Lewis and Red Mitchell (1048).

But what a kick, in contrast, to hear that clarion clarinet with a shouting big band! It's a combination that used to rule the roost of jazz during the Swing Era, but hasn't it been a long time since we've heard a clarinet as the featured horn in a big-band setting? (The last of the clarinet-playing big band leaders, Woody Herman, didn't feature himself that much in his later years, and doubled on alto and soprano as well.) And this IS a big band--the almost is a matter of numbers only, for with the skillful writing of Ernie Wilkins, those 12 instruments pack a wallop equal to the customary 16.

It is no struggle, though, for Wickman to make himself heard, even when the band gets going behind him. His sound projects so well, and it is never shrill, beautifully produced in all registers. And he knows how to pick his spots in the ensemble passages. However, there is plenty of room here for him to romp with just the excellent rhythm section, so he is able to display his command of dynamics as well as his power.

The band, like all great ensembles, represents an unbroken tradition. When Ernie Wilkins founded it in 1980, about a year after he'd decided to settle in Denmark, trumpeter Palle Bolvig and baritone saxophonist Per Goldschmidt were on board. They are the veterans, but Benny Rosenfeld took his place at Bolvig's side in 1981, Aage Tangaard first sat behind the drums in 1983, Jens Winther joined the trumpets in 1986, and that was also the year when reedman Jan zum Vohrde and bassist Jesper Lundgaard got involved. So this is no pickup band, but a real ensemble, and while I have not heard it in person, I have had the pleasure of encountering almost all the present players in Denmark (and even New York) over the past 16 years, when the Jazzpar Prize would bring me to Copenhagen. I honestly don't think there is a better pool of highly qualified jazz players anywhere in the world today. It was a great idea to pick a program of Ellingtonia. Ernie Wilkins, like any arranger worth his salt, loved and admired Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, and his scoring here captures the flavor, if not always the after all inimitable sound of Ellington. The pieces are well chosen, including landmarks spanning the decades from the 1920s to the 1960s, with a Wilkins original in the Ducal spirit added.

Johnny Come Lately stems from the marvelous early '40s period and represents Strayhorn at his most assertive. (A personal aside: I acquired the record while still in Denmark, but first heard the music while in Sweden, where my mother, grandmother and I found refuge from the Nazis, so this is a chance to say thanks for that. I never heard sweeter words

than "Valkommen til Sverige" on the water near Trelleborg!) I assume that the clarinet lead heard here and elsewhere is an adaptation, but it makes perfect sense and probably sounds even more Dukish than the original. Wickman is well featured here, quoting from Bach Goes to Town during the solo portion with rhythm section backing (a fine section this is) and then alternating phrases with the band and taking the bridge on his fifth chorus. A nice trumpet solo (Winther) is followed by the theme with clarinet lead and accents by the potent trumpet section. It's clear that Wickman is at home in a minor key.

Sophisticated Lady, like all beautiful women, wears its age well. The lovely melody (one never gets tired of it) offers Wickman an opportunity to display the warmth of his sound, among other qualities. Goldschmidt has a bridge passage that reminds us that Harry Carney owned this song, and hear how Wickman holds that long note against the repeated ensemble figure by flutes.

Kinda Dukish was an extension of Ellington's piano introduction to Rockin' in Rhythm in its 1950s version, as a rare feature for him (wonderful pianist that he was). So it is appropriate that Nikolaj Benzon starts it off. Wickman is very relaxed at this fast tempo, against some lively backup by the band. A drum solo, and a trumpet (Rosenfeld) whistles a la Cat Anderson (no mean feat) in the climax.

The Mooche is the oldest piece here, but certainly not dated (it remained a fixture in the Ellington Medley through the years). Again, Wickman is much at home in the minor climate, and his solo displays his sense of contrast and architecture (and command of all the instrument's registers). A great solo! And good work by the band, a plungered trumpet, a fluent alto (zum Vohrde ), and a fine clarinet coda.

What follows the earliest piece is the latest, from Duke's encounter with the reigning modern jazzman of the 1960s. Take the Coltrane is a fast minor blues and opens with a long piano solo. Varied voicings are to the fore in the theme statement, and there are potent solos by tenor (Harbeck) and trombone (Nielsen) framing Wickman's well-built statement that ends with a glimpse of Laura. Alto(zum Vohrde) enters on a break and has a brisk outing. Goldschmidt picks up the last phrase and, backed by rock-strady Lundgaard bass, dips into the depths. The tempo holds throughout, never rushing, through a fleet trumpet solo (Winther), setting up for a long drum solo that displays a rare and welcome sense for dynamic contrast. This long piece is of course a deserved showcase for the band's soloists--and its rhythm section.

Mainstem is another gem from the early 1940s, and again the blues, with some modulations and additions. The original tempo is adhered to, and there are good solos by tenor (Bevort) and trombone(Nielsen). But when Wickman takes over, it is a different story--and that's what he does here, tell a story, with great execution, speed and range, but always emotional content as well. Baritone with band riffs, interesting trumpet (Winther), and excellent scoring for the ensemble closing, piano peeping through.

Good Queen Bess is from the very special Ducal small group repertoire, with Johnny Hodges credited as composer--it sounds like on of his riffs.

It also sounds like a relaxed excursion on I Got Rythm changes, with an altered bridge. This is a nice tempo, and the results are most pleasant, with solos by clarinet, alto, tenor (piano on bridge) and ensemble paraphrase of the theme, bass soloing on the bridge. Then the theme, undisguised, returns with clarinet in lead. (During his solo, Wickman hints at High Society.)

My Little Brown Book, an appealing Strayhorn ballad, vintage 1942, is presented at a stately pace with plunger trombone(Jensen) taking a prominent role.

Wickman plays with great feeling here; he knows how to invest a vocabulary that can sound cold in other hands with lots of warmth. Wilkins did some fine scoring here, and the trombone acquits (himself) very well.

We end with A Little Bit of Duke, a fast ride on Rhythm changes with overtones of Basie as well as Ellington. Lots of solos here: Tenor(Harbeck), with guttural accent, Wickman, fleet of fingers, soprano (Bevort)(nice bridge), very good trombone (Jensen), fast but saying something, alto a la Bird 2004,(zum Vohrde) baritone romping, handling speed well on the big horn, trumpet (Jens) rising from ensemble against lively backdrop, a solo written for the band a la Cottontail, some fine lead trumpet here (Rosenfeld), a piano bit, and a cute ending with our man catting on top.

This was a good get-together, and it is no surprise to learn that Putte Wickman and the Ernie Wilkins Almost Big Band joined forces again. It makes a fine showcase for that nonpareil clarinet!

Dan Morgenstern

(Dan Morgenstern is Director of the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, and author of "Living with Jazz" (Pantheon Books, 2004))