



JazzTimes

AMERICA'S JAZZ MAGAZINE



JON IRABAGON

The Observer (Concord)



Jon Irabagon is among the growing breed of flamboyantly eclectic, genre-ignoring players, equally at home in “free jass” group improvisation, pop kitsch, his Sonny Rollins Tribute Trio and the skewed, postbop quartet Mostly Other People Do the Killing. The altoist’s previous 2009 release is a 47-minute sax-drums duet entitled *I Don’t Hear Nothin’ But the Blues*.

But after winning the 2008 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition, Irabagon cherry-picked an august rhythm section from the bosom of mainstream jazz—Kenny Barron, Victor Lewis and Rufus

Reid—to create a 10-song collection that rarely dazzles yet stands as one of the most cohesive, consistent and delightful discs of the year.

The venerable sidemen erase any distinction between art and craft, their timekeeping reliable but rarely predictable—the tone and placement of Barron’s backing chords, Reid’s upscale arpeggios, Lewis’ multi-textured percussion fills. Irabagon knew that any ensemble steeped in such talent and shared experience (they’ve performed as the Kenny Barron Trio and backed saxophonists from Stan Getz to Joel Frahm en masse) would impart new depth and dimension to the celebratory gusts of “Makai & Tacoma”; the sophisticated harmonies of “Joy’s Secret” and the title track; and the gorgeous, soulful refrain and exposition of “Closing Arguments.”

His estimable tunes in masterful hands, the altoist sets about proving the wisdom of the Monk Competition judges with his patient, lyrical escalation of intensity on “January Dream,” his flutelike cadenza on the Gigi Gryce ballad “The Infant’s Song” (after a 90-second duet with Reid to open the song), his Rollins-informed hunks of surging improvisation on “Cup Bearers,” and the yearning, note-bending grace with which he duets with Elmo Hope’s widow, pianist Bertha Hope, on Elmo’s “Bar Fly.”

For someone of Irabagon’s skills, the sky’s the limit. But this firmly grounded version of the young saxophonist sets the bar high.

BRITT ROBSON