

Review "Open Up"

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This is my second time reviewing a CD for New York based Jazz Guitarist Jeff Barone and I gotta say, as much as I really liked his first CD, this new one definitely kicks ass (pardon the expression)! It's the kind of album that has everything going for it on every level. The musicianship is "off da hook", the tunes are killer, and it even has Jazz Guitar great Jack Wilkins guesting on two cuts. What more could one ask for?

Jeff Barone is an extremely talented and versatile Guitarist in both Jazz and Classical genres as well as your more popular commercial styles. His playing is unrestrained and right on the money, reminding me at times of a young George Benson or Pat Martino with lines that are steeped in the tradition but with a modern edge. His technique is formidable but never over the top, which I'm sure he could do quite easily.

"Duban's Groove", a Barone original composition, kicks the CD off with a hard bop style minor blues that reminds me of Art Blakey's Messengers. It's a fun up-tempo tune that introduces Barone and his cohorts as fervent improvisers and ardent accompanists. Trumpeter Joe Magnarelli, Alto Sax player Mike Dubaniewicz, Drummer Rudy Petschauer, and B-3 Organ player Ron Oswanski each get to show what they can do, setting the tone for the rest of the CD. Barone sounds like he's having a blast playing this tune. An interesting dissonant line starts his solo and just when you begin to wonder where he's taking this, he lands back in the land of consonance, carrying on through the rest of the tune harmonically sound. Magnarelli, Dubaniewicz and Petschauer contribute spirited solos as well raising the bar quite high.

The next tune, "New Samba", another Barone original, features Barone on a warm sounding DiCarlo nylon string grooving to a

Samba beat. Magnarelli keeps it just as warm with a beautifully stated melody and Flugelhorn solo followed by Oswanski's gentle Organ solo. Barone's solo is filled with long flowing lines and smooth double-stops reminding me of a cross between Earl Klugh, Charlie Bryd and Laurendo Almeida. A wonderful use of the medium.

Barone's nylon string is also featured on the next track as well in a sensitive reading of the Jacques Brel/Rod McKuen classic "If You Go Away". Played in a traditional Organ trio setting, Barone, Oswanski and Petschauer create a melancholy mood fitting the theme of this tune with Barone coaxing some beautiful notes and chords from his DiCarlo. Oswanski gets in a quick half-chorus before they take the tune out. Wonderfully done!

The nylon string appears again on "Here's That Rainy Day", with an elegant solo guitar intro before the band settles in. Magnarelli takes the melody effortlessly with a gorgeous tone reminiscent of trumpeter Tom Harrell, who by the way, Barone has worked with in the past. Barone then outlines the changes with a combination of quick runs, fluid lines and nicely voiced chord shots. A great read on a classic chart.

And speaking of classic charts, Barone, Oswanski and Petschauer tear up "Falling In love With Love" not once, but twice. As Barone states in the liner notes*: "I counted off the alternate version at a slower tempo. Then we decided to do a second take, picking up the tempo, switching chord changes and swapping solos around." Just for the record, both takes sound great to me. As does the Lane/Loesser tune "I Hear Music", made famous by the unique vocal stylings of Billie Holiday, with a fun arrangement and inspired performances all around. Great stuff!

The cooking continues though as Herbie Hancock's twisted blues (ish) tune "Toys" gets a nice workout by Barone and company. Everyone is on board on this tune and it sounds like an old Blue Note side with the Guitar, Alto Sax and Trumpet playing ascending and descending intervals ala Wayne Shorter. Magnarelli blows fantastic on his solo as Barone revisits his Kenny Burrell roots, whether he knows it or not! Very cool!

Much the same can be said of another Barone original

composition, the wickedly funky title track, "Open Up". This is one of those tunes that gets you out of your seat and on the dance floor of your choosing. Everyone plays their respective asses off, reminding me of those commercial mid to late 70's Maynard Ferguson albums. "Mr. Mellow" anyone?

The remaining three tunes, "My Funny Valentine", "Quiet Now" and Barone's own "Jenna's Song", feature Barone in a duo setting as well as a solo setting. For "Quiet Now" and "Jenna's Song", Barone is joined by Jazz Guitar Master Jack Wilkins. The two, to coin a phrase, make beautiful music together in arrangements by Barone, that at times sound like exquisite chamber music with each player listening closely to the other in respect and admiration of the other's abilities. Just marvelous! As is Barone's solo Guitar version of "My Funny Valentine", to which he combines Jazz and Classical harmonies to create a unique take on an old chestnut. It's times like these when I wonder if Barone had ever decided to pursue a career in the Classical Arts alone. Personally, I'm thankful that he can shift from one to the other at a moments notice and is happy playing the music he wants.

Actually, this does leave me with another question: Why is Jeff Barone not a household name?! He's definitely got the goods. So what's the problem? The answer to that question may well remain a mystery but it's not for any lack of trying I'm sure.

That being said, do yourself a favor and grab a copy of Jeff Barone's Open Up. I highly recommend it and you will be supporting an artist most deserving of your attention and patronage. Enjoy!