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JAMES WEIDMAN

biography

A valued and talented pianist, James Weidman has been a sideman and accompanist in many settings over the past 20 years, from Abbey Lincoln and Steve Coleman to Kevin Mahogany and Joe Lovano. He has also proven to be an increasingly significant bandleader and composer. His most recent CD, *Three Worlds*, is arguably his finest recording to date.

On *Three Worlds*, Weidman performs nine of his originals plus the traditional “Joshua Fit The Battle Of Jericho” with his trio, a quartet with vibraphonist Jay Hoggard, and a sextet with trombonist Ray Anderson and the reeds of Marty Ehrlich. “I started writing for *Three Worlds* a couple of years before we made the recording,” remembers the pianist. “I knew conceptually how I wanted to present the music. As for personnel, I met drummer Francisco Mela through Joe Lovano in 2005. He is from Cuba, and not only knows that tradition well *and* swings. I toured with both Marty Ehrlich and Ray Anderson before, so we already had a musical relationship. I met bassist Brad Jones through Marty and have already played and recorded with Jay Hoggard. They had never played these songs before, but it came out exactly as I’d hoped. It was very much a musical family, the best of all worlds.”

James Weidman’s music fits into the modern mainstream of jazz without being predictable. With original chord changes and voicings, his mastery is demonstrated with various changes in rhythm and time. On *Three Worlds*, a trio of tunes showcase his trio. Two numbers have vibraphonist Hoggard making the group a quartet. Five selections feature Ehrlich and Anderson in the frontline of a particularly adventurous quintet. Wide ranging music like hard bop original “Mirrored Images” to the exuberant ensembles of “Razz 2.0” and a soulful “Joshua Fit The Battle Of Jericho,” make *Three Worlds* a program where repeated listenings will lead to more to discover.

Born and raised in Youngstown, Ohio, James Weidman recalls hearing gospel around the house along with plenty of jazz. “My Dad was a saxophonist so I heard a lot of records featuring saxophonists. Early on I knew of Dexter Gordon, Charlie Parker, Lockjaw Davis and John Coltrane.” He started piano lessons when he was seven and played clarinet, yet it was on organ that he had his first gigs in his father’s group starting when he was 14. “He gave me a crash course in playing the pop music and r&b of the time, along with standards and jazz organ grooves. Ohio did not have great a jazz scene at the time, but organ bars were popular.” It was not until attending Youngstown University that he became serious about becoming a jazz musician. He was a member of his college’s jazz band, and attended workshops given by the likes of Thad Jones, Max Roach and Bill Watrous. Two years after graduating college, he moved to New York to be at the center of jazz.

“Although there were a lot of things that I didn’t know yet, I was motivated to move to New York. It did not take long to find work. I played with a lot of great jazz musicians, including Cecil Payne, Pepper Adams and once with Sonny Stitt.” After a valuable year spent working

with Bobby Watson, he had a five year stint with Steve Coleman's Spirit Of Life Ensemble. "I enjoyed playing with him because he was, and still is doing something very different, and still is. I learned a great deal working with him."

Another very significant learning period took place during Weidman's six year tenure with Abbey Lincoln. "Abbey told us that she wanted us to really explore the music. She didn't want us just to accompany her. It inspired us to really listen to the emotional and elemental part of the performance and react to the music rather than just being exclusively in the background." Other important associations included two years with Cassandra Wilson (including recording Blue Skies), working with Kevin Mahogany for an 11-year period. and one year with Gloria Lynne. "With Gloria and also Dakota Staton, I really learned how to play the blues on piano."

While James Weidman gained a strong reputation for his ability to accompany a diverse variety of jazz singers, he also appeared regularly in instrumental settings. In the 1990s he co-led the Afro-Caribbean jazz quartet Taja with saxophonist TK Blue. The quartet is heard in top form on A Night At Birdland, a program featuring six Weidman originals, four from Blue, and Duke Ellington's "I Didn't Know About You." The pianist is showcased in a trio on People Music, a CD that documents his longtime musical partnership with drummer Marvin "Smitty" Smith shortly before Smith relocated to Los Angeles. The trio with bassist Belden Bullock performs six Weidman pieces, Abbey Lincoln's "Bird Alone," "Jeannine" and "Limehouse Blues" with spirit and swing. In addition, Weidman recorded All About Time, a quartet set with vibraphonist Jay Hoggard and vocals from Charlene Dawn. The repertoire includes five of the pianist's originals plus such songs as Thelonious Monk's "Ugly Beauty," "Memories Of You" and Coleman Hawkins' "Bean And The Boys."

In addition to recording Three Worlds, Weidman has been teaching at William Paterson University, arranging a set of slave songs for the UMO Jazz Orchestra in Helsinki, Finland, for a project called "The Black Spirituals." He also leads his own trio and duo in the New York area and appears in a countless number of musical situations, often as a leader. He also toured Russia, giving him a chance to perform with Russian jazz musicians.

"The music is so vast that I have a lot of different projects that I would like to get involved in, including arranging my music for a big band. I remember hearing early on that in New York musicians tend to get typecast. Well, even at that point, I had a lot of different interests. Many musicians specialize in one particular area but I have purposely put myself in quite a few different situations, sometimes during the same period. I have no doubt that there will be all kinds of unexpected projects in the future."

And there is no doubt that James Weidman's career will continue to feature the high-quality modern jazz, creativity and good taste that has characterized his important work thus far. Three Worlds gives listeners a strong sampling of his artistry.