

TENACITY

Honolulu Jazz Quartet

Long ago, Coleman Hawkins, the patriarch of the jazz tenor saxophone, told me that when he was on the road and found impressive musicians in towns and cities far from New York or Chicago, he'd advise them to relocate to those jazz centers if they wanted to be recognized. That was then. But now, jazz musicians from Poland, Japan and Scandinavia are expanding their reputations in the United States, and it's time for the distinctively lively Hawaiian American jazz scene to be more widely recognized.

I was first awakened to the buoyant life force of jazz in Hawaii by the release in 2004 of "Sounds of the City" by the Honolulu Jazz Quartet, led by bassist John Kolivas. My criterion of any kind of music is whether it makes me feel more alive; and on listening to "Sounds of the City," I called John Kolivas to find out more about the quartet and the jazz scene in Hawaii.

Now with the arrival of the Honolulu Jazz Quartet's "Tenacity", John Kolivas, tenor and soprano saxophonist Tim Tsukiyama, pianist Dan Del Negro, and drummer Adam Baron have even more resoundingly become part of the international family of jazz.

From the first notes of the initial track, the pulse – the life force of jazz – courses through the session, all the more freshly and intriguingly because all of the compositions are originals, as are the players.

Tim Tsukiyama's big, warm sound and deep swing on tenor is complemented by the intimate lyricism of his soprano saxophone. And throughout, pianist Dan Del Negro embodies the continually regenerating "sound of surprise" of jazz. Or, as he says of the "vibe" of his composition, "Honolulu Hang" in this set, it reminds him of "the fun and excitement of doing jazz gigs, hanging out, and enjoying the company of my fellow musicians and the great jazz fans here in Honolulu."

Drummer, Adam Baron, not only keeps what Count Basie guitarist Freddie Green called "the rhythm wave" flowing, but he's also a listening drummer, seamlessly anticipating the improvisatory directions of his colleagues.

And John Kolivas on bass reminds me of what Duke Ellington once told me when I asked him what he looked for in bringing a new player into his orchestra. "I want a musician," Duke said, "who listens!" In the Honolulu Jazz Quartet, Kolivas has exemplified the very definition of jazz – a conversation of individual voices fully listening to one another and cohering into a unique, continually evolving organism. Or, as Max Roach once put it, "jazz is constitutional democracy in action."

Each of these musicians – as their biographies elsewhere in these notes indicate – has extensively varied experience with established jazz musicians beyond – as well as in

– Hawaii. And together they have emerged into the front ranks of jazz combos – all the more so because, as I’ve noted, they can create their own multi-colored repertory.

Confessing my lack of knowledge of the history of jazz in Hawaii, I asked John Kolivas for a guide. With historical notes from Abe Weinstein, he pointed out that the music was blended with native Hawaiian sounds as far back as the 1920’s when Johnny Noble, a Hawaiian, led a jazz band at the Moana Hotel.

A key phase in the jazz education of local Hawaiian musicians was the presence, in the 1940’s, of the military bands of Artie Shaw, Claude Thornhill, and Ray Anthony. Then, in the 1950’s Hawaiians heard first-hand, Louis Armstrong, Sarah Vaughan, Billy Eckstine, and Abbey Lincoln. Also on the scene, John Kolivas recalls, was trombonist Trummy Young, with whom John played in the 1970’s. I got to know Trummy in the 1940’s – when he was part of the jazz scene in Boston, where I had a jazz radio program. Trummy’s warmth and wit also characterize the members of the Honolulu Jazz Quartet.

A very personal note here. Reading John Kolivas’ biography, I was stunned – and greatly gratified – to learn that when he was 12 years old, his “fascination with jazz blossomed after reading Nat Hentoff’s ‘Jazz Country.’”

“Jazz Country” was the first novel I wrote for young readers, and, to my surprise, it was widely read not only in the United States, but also in Europe, and especially in Japan – where it is still in print. I wanted youngsters to get a feeling for the continuous self-discovery of being part of this music, as well as the strongly individual personalities of the players who reveal their very souls in creating jazz.

As Duke Ellington used to say, “I write for each individual in the band because each player’s sound is his soul.”

I am so pleased to find that I had something to do, however marginally, with the immersion into this music of 12-year-old John Kolivas and therefore, again marginally, into the creation of the Honolulu Jazz Quartet, this fusion of four swinging souls.

The Honolulu Jazz Quartet – through its’ performances at the Hawaii International Jazz Festival, the Honolulu Symphony Pops, and jazz venues throughout Hawaii – is ready to be recognized in jazz scenes throughout the world, as is manifestly, invigoratingly evident in “Sounds of the City” and now “Tenacity”.

In Robert Pennybacker’s liner notes for “Sounds of the City,” he writes of the experience you’re about to have in listening to this recording:

“A quartet in the purest sense of the word, there is no ‘star’ or ‘front-man’ in the group; the only star is the sound these four men create together – a rich, full-bodied jazz sound.”

I only write liner notes for recordings that make me want to hear them again – and again. It is a privilege to celebrate the Honolulu Jazz Quartet. They are “Jazz Country!”

- Nat Hentoff, author “Jazz Is”, “The Jazz Life”, “Listen to the Stories”, and “American Music Is”.