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Album review: 'The New York Session'

By Ron Netsky

Mark Lewis

"The New York Session"

Audio Daddio

marklewismusic.com



Multi-instrumentalist Mark Lewis may not be a household name in the jazz world because he's spent much of his career in Europe and Canada. But Lewis has played with greats like Bobby Hutcherson, Randy Brecker, and Johnny Griffin. And on his new album, "The New York Session," he's in the stellar company of George Cables on piano; Essiet Essiet, bass; and Victor Lewis, drums. From the fluttering flute that opens the album on "Koan" to the furious saxophone that closes it on "Roll 'em Joe," Lewis is a fantastic player.

Because the flute is far less common than saxophone in jazz performance, it is startling to hear how he uses every textural possibility to express himself in his solo. I found myself wishing there was more flute on the sax-dominated album. Veteran pianist Cables, the other star here, is on fire throughout, bringing his exuberant style to every flourish he takes. Bassist Essiet Essiet, who doesn't only lend solid support but also is a superb player on the occasional solo. Lewis, a prolific writer with 1,700 compositions to his credit, adds 11 more worthy tunes here.

REVIEWS CDS

Mark Lewis: The New York Session

By Raul da Gama - Jun 3, 2017

Any album by Mark Lewis is something to look forward because more exceptional music from his songbook comes to light. Not that any catching up is possible because Lewis is a prolific composer and has written over 1,700 works since he first started out as a professional musician in 1972. The New York Session featuring an all-star cast of George Cables on piano, Victor Lewis on drums and Essiet Essiet on bass is his 20th album and he shows no sign of slowing down, despite living far from the madding (jazz) crowd of New York City. Still, from his Bremerton, a small town in Washington State, Lewis still manages to record at least one album every two years.

Listening to the music of The New York Session one begins to see why Mark Lewis is so sought after, not only in his home state, but across America and indeed the world, especially in The Netherlands, where he spent fourteen years working as a first-call alto saxophonist and flutist. It's not difficult to find out why. His music is utterly songful and modern, which are two aspects of much contemporary improvised music that seem to cancel each other out in the North American universe. His tone is unusually deep for an alto saxophone and he can make that horn sing. He plays without the histrionics and yet his improvisations are thrilling and provocative, and he is constantly challenging the musicians around him, who throw down the gauntlet back at him. This makes for exhilarating listening throughout the performance.

The New York Session begins with a haunting piece entitled "Koan". The work featuring Mark Lewis on flute is utterly mesmerising dialogue about life for those affected by the Fukushima meltdown. His extraordinarily whispered playing seems to provoke "the great doubt" about the "illogical logic of life" with deathly-calm, soaring lines aimed at George Cables, who attempts to answer with his evocative playing, which together with Victor Lewis' breathy drums and the gravitas of Essiet Essiet's leads to an appropriately open-ended resolution at the song's end. The piece sets the stage for ten other remarkable pieces that follow. And as one song leads to the other it soon becomes evident that we are listening to a kind of concerto unleashed by "Koan".

The "concerto" apart, all the pieces are short and pithy observations, narratives, portraits and elegies that appear to be refracted into a continuously running bioscope hand-held by Mark Lewis. Hidden connections seem to link the exuberant "Child's Play" with the festivities of "Boberto's Magical World", and the viscerally exciting "Sierra Leone" with "Not as Beautiful as You" via the breathtaking harmonics of "The Lydian Express" to "Roll 'em Joe". These continuities are of the kind that bring film editing techniques to mind, with juxtapositioning and cross-cutting rather than blending or overlapping (of situation and storyline), with a distinct notion of relating invention to principal idea: that of the "Koan". However, because the startle factor is high in each song, the whole album begs a second listen, like a film's re-run.

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Top Customer Reviews

★★★★★ Inventiveness and Happiness in Jazz
By Dr. Debra Jan Biblett TOP 500 REVIEWER on January 27, 2017

Most jazz fans are familiar with veteran pianist George Cables and drummer Victor Lewis and perhaps bassist Essiet Essiet from his work with Abdullah Ibrahim or Art Blakey. This significant rhythm section has come together to support alto saxophonist and flutist Mark Lewis, who, despite his 40 years of gigs [14 years in Europe, based in Rotterdam] and some albums, is largely a question mark. Esteemed jazz historian Ted Gioia provided the package notes to this new album because he appreciated, as new listeners will soon recognize, that this redman is a brilliant improviser, a prolific composer, and master performer. The first track demonstrates another, surprising talent of Mark Lewis, and as a world music fan I took especial note: The first track mimicked with its powerful breathy sound a Japanese shakuhachi, which Lewis had in fact studied. The melodic style of "Koan" is reminiscent of John Kaizan Neptune. From the serene and exotic to the fast and furious "Child's Play," as Cables solos and the saxophonist converses with drummer. "DL Blues" (for bassist Dick Lupino) slows the beat and mellows the mood. Another shift is the Caribbean frolic "Boberto's Magical World" (for drummer Bob Merrihew). Mark Lewis plays with confident exuberance and improvisational extravagance. Indeed, enthusiastic, fit and joyous bounce characterize much of his writing and performance. A sweet ballad, "Connie" (for club owner Connie Jacob) follows and features a splendid bass solo. The next track takes us on an imaginary trip to "Sierra Leone" in West Africa, and here the drums produce an attractive tropical groove. While "Up to It" is a cheerful pump in the road, "Not as Beautiful as You" focuses our attention; it is a gentle, slow reflection on piano taken up by the saxophone, and we drift into daydreams. When the merry work "Summer Is Over" is over, happiness is felt. "Lydian Express" of course applies the Lydian mode, which Essiet explores on his bass. Mark Lewis's springiness and sweetness of tone has a touch of Stan Getz. The final track is "Roll 'em Joe" in 12/8 time and all the musicians go all out. Thus, New York Session is a beautiful, diverse, melodic excursion in marvelous jazz.

HIGH STANDARDS JAZZ

Wednesday, June 28, 2017

Mark Lewis (alto sax and flute) "The New York Session"

Let's put it this way. If you could go into the studio with George Cables, piano; Essiet Essiet, bass; and Victor Lewis, drums, you might be shaking like a leaf but I'll bet you'd do it. Well, that's what alto guru Mark Lewis did in a Brooklyn studio. And this CD is the result. Lewis offers a freewheeling but light touch on eleven originals with widely varying textures and moods. What is consistent is Lewis' flawless sound, ease of delivery, and complete lack of showy excess. Pianist Cables, whom Art Pepper once described as "Mr. Beautiful", is a dream come true as both accompanist and soloist. His section mates, Essiet and Victor Lewis, are by now seasoned players ready for any assignment. From first note to last, this is the very definition of jazz, the essence of the art form.

Audio Daddio; 2016; appx. 64 min.

New Issues

MARK LEWIS, NEW YORK SESSION, AUDIO DADDIO 1042. KOAN / CHILD'S PLAY / DL BLUES / ROBERTO'S MAGICAL WORLD / CONNIE / SIERRA LEONE / UP TO IT / NOT AS BEAUTIFUL AS YOU / SUMMER IS OVER / THE LYDIAN EXPRESS / ROLL RM JOE. 66:00. Lewis, as; Cables, p; Essiet Essiet, b; Victor Lewis, d, 9/16/2015, NYC.

Sluggish saxophonist Mark Lewis is a completely new name to me but a run-through listen to this release will reassure one and all that he is far from novice status. With over four decades of playing experience and over a thousand original compositions to his credit (all eleven heard here are his) Lewis has somehow been under this listeners' radar. One can often judge an artist by the company he keeps and the altoist has chosen an impressive trio of jazz stalwarts for this Big Apple session. The sterling George Cables, the ever dependable Essiet Essiet and the impeccable Victor Lewis all contribute equally to the success of this impressive date. From the opening exotic "Koan" with appropriate flute work to the closing time-twister "Roll 'em Joe" it is all covered in Ted Gioia's astute liners. One of my own personal musicianship tests is how freshly they play the blues and on "DL Blues" Lewis navigates the ageless form devoid of cliché. This one passes the test with flying colors.

Larry Hollis

120 | CADENCE MAGAZINE | APRIL/MAY/JUNE 2017

"A beautiful album by four excellent craftsmen giving life to Mark Lewis's compositions -- the real stars of this show. Listen a couple times; you'll be whistling these captivating melodies, too."

- Lynn Darroch, Bright Moments Café host, KMHDP Portland

"This record is a killer, we're playing it a lot at KNKX 88.5"

- Abe Beeson, Evening Jazz host, KNKX Seattle

Richard Scheinin @RichardScheinin · Jan 6 (Music critic, San Jose Mercury) I'm Listening 2: new album by saxophonist Mark Lewis, beautiful player. Cables, VLewis, Essiet, all clearly having fun.



The Mercury News

Entertainment > Music

Mark Lewis makes rare return to Bay Area, with new album in tow



Reeds player Mark Lewis makes a rare return to then Bay Area for a Jan. 19 show at Cafe Stritch in San Jose.

By ANDREW GILBERT, CORRESPONDENT | PUBLISHED: January 27, 2017 at 10:50 am | UPDATED: January 27, 2017 at 10:51 am

Mark Lewis never crossed paths with Baseball Hall of Famer Wee Willie Keeler, who died some three decades before the saxophonist/flutist was born in 1958.

But as much as any jazz musician on the scene Lewis has thrived by minding the diminutive outfielder's motto to "keep your eye on the ball and hit 'em where they ain't."

A prolific composer, resourceful entrepreneur, dedicated educator, and highly lyrical alto saxophonist and flutist, Lewis learned to find opportunities where others feared to tread. For instance, during the 17 years he spent based in the Netherlands he didn't let a little cold weather keep him from making the rounds in Scandinavia.

"No one wanted to play in Sweden in the winter, but I didn't mind," says Lewis, who makes a rare Bay Area appearance Thursday at Café Stritch with pianist Eddie Mendenhall, bassist John Wittala, and drummer Jason Lewis. "I'd play anywhere. I'm always happy when I come to a town when there's no jazz. I'll go and find a club and bring some music in."

Bay Area jazz fans of a certain age might remember Lewis from the early 1980s, when landed in San Francisco for about a year in the midst of his European sojourn. While living in Rotterdam he had launched the Audio Daddio label, which documented leading European players like bassist Hein van de Geyn and expat and touring American jazz greats like drummer Philly Joe Jones and tenor saxophonist Clifford Jordan.

Wherever he toured he brought a stack of records to sell, and when he arrived in the Bay Area he made the rounds with LP's under his arm, garnering airplay for his releases on radio station KJAZ. His first Bay Area band featured drummer Glenn Cronkhite, pianist Mark Little, and bassist Harley White (who also anchored the trio of piano legend Earl "Fatha" Hines at the time). When Lewis couldn't find gigs in clubs "we played on the streets," he recalls.

"I did a college tour with the trumpeter Al Hood's trio doing all original music. It was fun, but they were a little too free for my taste. I was trying to do music that would introduce one feeling at a time into the musical stream, not all at once."

Now based in his hometown Bremerton, Wash., Lewis once again arrives in the Bay Area with a new album in tow, "New York Session" (Audio Daddio). An all-star project featuring piano great George Cables, veteran bassist Essiet Essiet, and the supremely swinging drummer Victor Lewis, it's a vibrant collection of his melodically charged originals, tunes inspired mostly by friends and fellow musicians.

Something of a cult figure, Lewis has gained some high profile fans, like pianist, jazz historian and Daily Beast columnist Ted Gioia, who writes in the album's liner notes, "There's so much to savor and admire here. Lewis's musicality, his inventiveness, his humor, his ability to immerse himself in the soundscape of the performance with total emotional commitment."

An enthusiastic conversationalist, Lewis can introduce five interesting ideas before an interviewer has the chance to slow him down. Though he says he'd run into the "New York Session" musicians over the years, he didn't share a lot of musical history, and that shaped his choice of tunes. Another factor was his limited eye sight. Legally blind since childhood, he wanted to make sure that everyone was on the same creative page.

"I don't see well enough to see facial expressions," Lewis said. "I use simple compositions because I didn't want to clutter the purity of the sound we were trying to get."

Always seeking to connect with audiences, Lewis makes a powerful impression wherever he lands. As a young player starting out on the Seattle scene in the mid-1970s, he caught the ear of veteran players, like Otis "Candy" Finch, a well-traveled drummer who recorded memorable sessions with organist Shirley Scott and worked regularly with Dizzy Gillespie.

Finch took Lewis under his wing and got him to get out of the Pacific Northwest and head to Europe. In Rotterdam, he landed his first gig with the help of tenor sax titan Johnny Griffin.

"I was really lucky to play with some grand daddies of the music," Lewis says.

Now he's one of the old-school masters, a player who has thrived as a creative force by making opportunities for himself and finding spaces neglected by his peers.

MARK LEWIS QUARTET

When: 8:30 p.m. Jan. 19

Where: Café Stritch, 374 S. 1st St., San Jose

—by Mike Greenblatt, March 29, 2017



Is New York Session by musician/producer/engineer/educator/entrepreneur **Mark Lewis** (Audio Daddio) the best jazz CD of the year so far? If not, it's close. The legally blind alto sax man doubles on flute, has recorded 20 albums, composed over 1,700 tunes, and is now back in his native Seattle area after living and working for 14 years in Rotterdam, a city in the Netherlands, as an ex-pat. His quartet is incomparable. George Cables was Dexter Gordon's piano player. Victor Lewis (no relation) was Stan Getz's drummer. Nigerian-American Essiet Essiet played bass in Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers. All 11 tracks are the highlights. Be it blues or "Koan" (inspired by Lewis's experience playing a Japanese end-blown bamboo shakuhachi) or "Child's Play" (where Cables does what he used to do with another alto man, Art Pepper) or the carnivalesque "Boberto's Magical World" or the sublimely sweet and introspective "Not As Beautiful As You" or the African "Sierra Leone" on through the closing "Roll 'em Joe" in 12/8 time (don't try at home), New York Session is jazz at its best. Period.

Jazz Weekly

Creative Music and other forms of Avant Garde

by George W. Harris • March 23, 2017



Mark Lewis delivers his alto with a rich and velvety tone for 10 of these 11 songs, and lets his flute create Eastern mystic moods on the opening track of this impressive session with all stars Victor Lewis/dr, George Cables/p and Essiet Essiet/b. The leader has the heart of a booper, as he dances over the crispy drums on "Child's Play" bounces on "Up to It" and bossas with the team on "The Lydian Express." Lewis' mallets create exotic environments for the leaders' fluffy and sensuous reed on "Sierra Leone" and Cables is as impressionistic as Monet on "Not as Beautiful as You." They slide on the scale for a gorgeous and sleek "DL Blues" while performing with elegance and sweat on "Summer Is Over." Take two of these everyday for whatever ails ya.



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Wednesday, June 28, 2017

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Audio Daddio; 2016; appx. 64 min.

120 | CADENCE MAGAZINE | APRIL/MAY/JUNE 2017

"I've been listening to Mark's record. Excellent, he is quite a musician. I like him because he's Different and Different is Good. Tell Mark that he has a new fan"

- Richie Cole, jazz saxophonist

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2017

The 39th Annual Jazz Station Awards / The Best Jazz of 2017

2017 Alto Sax:

1. Richie Cole ("Latin Lover" – RCPPI);
2. **Mark Lewis** ("The New York Session" - Audio Daddio);
3. Dick Oatts ("Use Your Imagination" - SteepleChase);
4. Vincent Herring ("Hard Times" – Smoke Sessions);
5. Lee Konitz ("Frescalato" – Impulse!);
6. Bobby Watson ("Made In America" – Smoke Sessions);

2017 Flute:

1. Charles Lloyd ("Passin' Thru" – Blue Note);
2. Hubert Laws (one track from "Reverence" w/ Nathan East - Yamaha);
3. **Mark Lewis** (one track from "The New York Session" - Audio Daddio);

ANCIENT VICTORYS NEWS



MARK LEWIS: NEW YORK SESSION CD RS1042

Audio Daddio- MarkLewisMusic.com

I knew this recording was in the mix, as a couple of times Lewis had toured back east rehearsing and recording. This is a very strong project, all Lewis' original compositions, and shows his prowess as a major player in the international world of jazz music.

He continually plays with internationally recognized musicians, like top twenty of all time bass player, David Friesen, or the highly inventive international concert player and instructor, John Stowell, on guitar. Here, he teams up with George Cables on piano, Victor Lewis on drums, and Essiet Essiet on bass for a quartet that digs inside and moves these songs forward. The recording opens with the gorgeous ballad "Koan." Lewis is a wavering bee on flute, and his solos waver and moan. Clear tone, beautiful, as the bass comes in with a light dance. Piano is light and supportive with touches of flutter. The backing of the flute takes on more dynamics as Lewis flusters and extends. Cables warmly works the ballad lines with the big bass from Essiet anchoring, then a cascade of piano notes picks up slight Victor Lewis percussion, only to have Cables take the piano up a notch. Lewis returns in warm flute tones that carry and suspend. "Child's Play" has Lewis on alto sax with drummer Lewis in an almost patriotic drummer-boy roll; then they burst out an up-speed pop head with a high-speed Essiet bass, Cables touching, and the drums with little shots. Mark is like a hyper Paul Desmond with warm notes pouring rapidly and then building the volume and intensity, releasing to a hard swinging Cables in fistfuls of driving highly rhythmic piano lines. Breathtaking solos and movement. Players are all involved. Lewis returns to trade with Victor Lewis with brisk shots by both. A joyful, fun pop. "DL's Blues" is a lazy loping blues with Lewis even more in the Desmond lyrical mood working off Cables' warm blues swing undercurrent. The bass walks and the piano talks blues, all warm, singing, developing in complexity. Lewis cements with just dashes of drum color. Back to Mark, who stays in the melodic swinging blues space, grabbing a high note, but all under a warm dancing control. The body sways from the solid core of this song. Essiet takes a solo without rustling a feather while he swings to the core. Back come drums and piano to trade and swing out. "Boberto's Magical World" gives a strong Latin backbeat as Lewis takes the alto quietly in little accents, lightly like a Jobim vocal. Such a dance, a shuffle Latin style. Victor Lewis makes magic feel for all with the percussion. They have a strong but not heavy-handed Latin pulse, and by a third of the way through the six-minute cut, Lewis has begun to tune it up, diving, swooping, hitting some sharp high notes but then releasing as Cables takes the lyricism into the piano dancing but their socks off. He grabs clusters of mid-range notes, makes dashing runs, counters both hands in a delightful solo. Again we get Victor Lewis' controlled, exact yet warm percussion solos, many inventive trades with piano and alto. Lewis on alto goes back to the dancing head and takes it out. A light, easy, warm, just slightly swinging piano takes us into "Connie," a talking alto solo, warm, taking us into that Desmond space from the Lewis perspective. He makes it feel so easy and engages such warmth in his alto lines. Superb backing of his solo by the trio. The inventive, totally accessible original music will take you in. Cables takes the cue and dances the line, charging slightly and then using the high portion of the piano. He develops superb lyricism while gaining complexity. Cables releases to the low, sonorous sound of Essiet's bass with bold warmth and still the lyricism. Mark is very good at keeping all the players in the middle of the mix. The alto comes back in quietly with the lyrical head. Gorgeous warmth. "Sierra Leone," with bass and percussion has a slightly jungle walk piano and alto drifting over top with Lewis quietly calling out. They take you into the weaving, reminiscent of some 70s jazz, staying interesting and moving with floating piano and alto using long extended lines that fade to the ending. Kind of a "Dream When You're Feeling Blue" type of feel. "Up To It" is a driving, straight-ahead pop with an intricate light-driving dance by Lewis' alto. He develops the rapid complexity while staying confined within the accuracy and streaming note line and avoids screaming it out. Victor Lewis has little percussive bursts. Cables jumps all over with rapid continuing runs. He drives with so much lyricism and with always interesting piano solos. Essiet is just hard swinging under it all as Victor Lewis punches and keeps the meter rolling. Lewis returns burning in a warm lyrical full tone. "Not As Beautiful As You" features Cables in beautiful ballad chords and runs using most of the piano but very lyrical, a gorgeous warm full sound. He never pulses, is deep in the ballad mode, slowly building and releasing. This is Cables in full wide gorgeous panorama. Mark moves in, barely breathing, taking from the Cables lines and extending, staying warm and close to the beauty of the ballad. Bass and percussion are just touching, accenting, filling a sound. Such quiet, loving beauty. You can hear a singer in this somewhere. Again, the Desmond influence, but the way Cables and Mark work is a different warmth and beauty. "Summer is Over" is a laid back light dance, led with the alto sax warm, lyrical, and just skirting the piano, bass, and touch of percussion. There is a bit of loping and space as piano and rhythm accent the sound of the horn. Cables' solo is light with little high-end runs, always of swings to the pulse of Victor Lewis underneath. Bass just kind of hits his notes here and there for emphasis and rhythmic impact. Lewis closes warmly with the head. "The Lydian Express" has the alto running lightly then pushing the dancing motif as the rhythm sways to slightly Latin underneath; again, the opening is more like a Jobim vocal. Essiet has a highly lyrical, expressive bass line with just touches of percussion as he builds with rapid bass clusters, and the piano can barely be heard hinting the line. Cables comes back in dancing the lyrical line again with much warmth, beauty, and keeping mind and feet moving even as he builds the complexity. "Roll 'em Joe" is the most scorched-earth shot and written for guitarist Joe Huron. If in my writing I seem to be falling away from the driving sax, large sound blowing and extensions, never fear. In "Roll 'em Pete," after a fully stated head and the driving catchy dancing rhythm that they are all engaged in, Lewis begins to drive, exploring, heavy circular blowing, gritty biting, extensions, going down to the lower guttural part of the alto. He counters his own blowing, develops some walls of sound out of the Wilson/Coltrane book. He releases to Cables who dances lyrically, quickly, tightly and starts a bit above the Lewis fray, but in a swinging building sound that stays to drive low. Suddenly, piano cluster gems emerge. All the time, Victor Lewis and Essiet are driving the song home. Victor Lewis has a low, almost conga drum start that builds in his solo. Hear him change the intricacy and interplay. Mark Lewis is back in, and they drive with raspy alto, almost like Lewis has a special reed in the alto. This is a strong finish to a superb CD that should bring more international jazz attention to this Northwest jazz legend. I feel privileged to have watched his growth since 1976. Packaging is a triple fold-over eight-panel with a jewel box for holding the CD. Author and publisher and reviewer for many ions, Ted Gioia wrote the liner notes that are informative and show his love of what he considers one of the major talents around, doing his grove to make sure folks understand how good Mark Lewis is in our world jazz scene. His notes take three panels. Another has a fine Mark Lewis picture, then one with the band, and another with the band sitting (a wonderful shot). There are the songs and playing time. Cover has a close-up headshot of Mark and the taxis running the streets of New York. Another panel has credits and contacts along with a picture of Mark and his flute. The actual CD has all the info, artist, contact tune list, and times! Yes! Back binding has big clear info for shelf retrieval.

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