

## Mark Lewis and John Stowell

8/3/13 Auburn Wine & Caviar, Auburn

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Review by Chris Lunn



**I was totally startled by what turned out to be one of the most inventive, balanced, and creative duo situations I have seen.** Lewis has worked with lots of duos and is home in this format, and so has Stowell over the years (See CD reviews for a Stowell guitar duo). Stowell has his specially hand-made Oregon guitars that are set up for him in such a way that he just barely touches the strings and the notes leap off the board. Lewis, who can almost have a Paul Desmond sound, can also have a full-throated sharp alto attack that he uses in a four-piece band or with other horns.

But here they were engaged in a musical conversation, just talking, never taking the space away from each other, **always enhancing and at the same time challenging each other.**

“My Romance” was so light, moved with such ease; they opened the song from inside. They can flurry the notes, but not as speed merchants but joyful interplay. “Dolphin” had warm jazz underpinnings, as **Stowell was effortless in the finger work.** And he would back Lewis’ alto with chord bass-oriented guitar, but there were little touches that moved the flavor of the line. Amazing, inventive solos here. Stowell would counterpoint himself in his own line, would run off some chord and then counter with a burst of single notes. “Blue Shift” had bluing tinges and a blues head with the guitar playing inventive chord lines. **Lewis reached into his Desmond soft lyrical bag for the most fluid, lovely lines.** Stowell picked up those lines and ran on them with counterpoint, or echoed a line and then moved into his solo, and then they traded. **Hard to realize so much music and diversity comes out of just two musicians.** One of my favorites was “What’s New,” in which the word lines are kind of talking, and they stay within those fluid boundaries to develop the cross-talk. They really brought out a different character in this song. This vocal improv style allowed some interesting quoting of each other.

Next, Lewis moved from alto to flute for a couple of tunes. With the flute, it darts more over the lines, and there is a bit less intricate interplay, but the luscious sound of flute and full guitar chords and then dancing the songs really works, whether in ballad or mid-tempo form. On a GG Gryce tune, they were very exploratory on the melodic content. The rapid dual lead made this one of my favorites, too.

In the second set, they took a ballad with a blue and dissonant character while still making it dance. This was a warm “fall” with a gorgeous end. “Innocent” had the flute again with a bossa lyrical movement. The darting flute lines always had an underpinning of Stowell in perfect rhythmic pulse, but it was never just keeping time, more support with creative counterpoint, pushing the idea, framing a solid voice to work with. **Lewis and Stowell work like two great lead singers** who can also harmonize and work multiple octaves. They are one and yet can distinguish their own line and direction. “Stella by Starlight” was another lovely ballad, accessible to the listener, yet complex in the interpretation. Part of why this works is **they allow a large space for each other, and they have fast and incredible ears.** Our mutual friend, the late jazz singer Vonne Griffin, introduced Lewis to “Blue Skies” that with their pace, capitalized on the lyricism a la Desmond and with Stowell’s phrasing in rapid clusters and counter pulses bringing this song to a whole new light. Clifford Brown’s “Joy Spring” is a song I love and bought when I was in high school in a 10-inch LP, probably a Pacific Jazz release. This is a dancing, lovely, joyful musical roadmap, and these two make it their own, reminding me of Mulligan, Fred Katz and other musicians of that time.

I have to say, through the fourteen or so songs I heard, **I sat under an umbrella of continuous amazement at the depth at which these two conducted the musical conversation.** That was what it was, a highly intellectual conversation set to music. What a privilege.