

Salute to Pepper Adams' Works

In spite of a low-profile career and a relatively early death, baritone saxophonist Pepper Adams has attracted a number of avid, well-placed fans. For example, in Canada, bandleader Denny Christianson helped keep Adams' name alive after the saxophonist's death in 1986, releasing two albums featuring him as guest soloist, and now jazz historian Gary Carner has fulfilled a 28-year project to celebrate Adams' life and music. Carner, who is also a wine broker, has put together a tribute that is multifaceted enough to rival a Disney film launch: an annotated discography, concerts paired with wine tastings in 30 cities, a five-volume virtual box set and two CDs.

Joy Road: The Complete Works Of Pepper Adams (Motéma 98-102; 75:30/66:43/69:36/64:36/60:40 ★★★★★) and its component parts is a massive undertaking for a composer whose output comprises 43 pieces. Pianist Jeremy Kahn plays a principal role, leading a traditional trio on Volume 1, and a quartet featuring contemporary baritone virtuoso Gary Smulyan on Volume 4, as well as accompanying singer Alexis Cole on Volume 5. A well-travelled journeyman, Kahn played one concert with Adams, and crossed paths with Carner after being given lead sheets to about half of the saxophonist's compositions. Bank-rolled by Carner, he led bassist Rob Amster and drummer George Fludas into the studio in 2006 to record 14 pieces he had arranged for the occasion.

One of the most eloquent soloists in the immediate post-bop years, Adams helped take his instrument from the rhythm section to the front line, and his compositions were written as vehicles for his own horn. As Carner points out, about half of the 43 were written during the time when Adams was a soloist-for-hire from 1977-'83. Kahn's approach on Volume 1 is to tackle them head-on, tinkering with tempo or adding new introductions, as required. Some, like a peppy "Valse Celtique," reveal little of the composer's personality, except that he had a particular affinity for waltz time. Others, like "Ephemera," which Adams considered his masterpiece, show an artist who could transfer his own considerable improvisational gifts into compelling songs.

When Smulyan joins Kahn's trio, sparks really fly. On pieces like "Dylan's Delight," which Kahn arranged to reflect Adams' tenure with Charles Mingus, Smulyan's ability to jab and weave through multiple tempo changes reflects his debt to the older bari master. Like Adams, Smulyan's tone is cutting, but filled with subtle variations. The ballad "Julian," Adams' tribute to Cannonball Adderley, fits the big horn like a bespoke suit, and Smulyan fills



every seam with emotion.

Atlanta pianist Kevin Bales takes a much different sonic approach, using fluid guitarist Barry Greene as his main soloist. Greene's floating approach to "Lovers Of Their Time" illustrates Adams' ability to create structures that appear to hover, while the samba "Bossallegro"—a favorite form of Adams'—shows the complexity of his melodies. On "Claudette's Way," Bales and Greene build tension through restraint, while bassist Rodney Jordan works Adams' melodious changes.

Featuring bassist Dennis Irwin in one of his last recordings, Volume 3 fleshes out 11 of Adams' songs, utilizing a sextet that includes trumpeter Joe Magnarelli, trombonist John Mosca and baritone saxophonist Frank Basile in the front line. A sideman for Michael Bubl , Dave Holland, Joe Lovano and others, Basile has followed Adams and Smulyan into the baritone sax chair of the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, co-led by Thad Jones and Mel Lewis during Adams' time. While the sextet format might be closer to how Adams envisioned these tunes being performed, the larger lineup obscures some of the intricacies of the structures on display in the trio and quartet settings. Still, as a blowing session, this contains several highlights, and Irwin sounds exceptional.

Volume 5—which, along with a sampler, is available as a physical CD—takes the most risks. In addition to commissioning poet Barry Wallenstein to write lyrics to seven of the pieces, Carner requested that Kahn re-arrange several ballads with faster tempos. Some of Wallenstein's wordplay is overwrought but Cole's voice makes it go down easy. No bari here, but the twin tenors of Pat LaBarbera and Eric Alexander sound sweet, especially on a rocking re-imagining of "Julian." **DB**

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