

FATHERHOOD

Dan Wolfe would have been beaming if he could have heard this recording. *Fatherhood* is Ben Wolfe's tribute to his dad, who passed away in 2018, as well as a meditation on what it means to be a father to his own son. Ben and his dad experienced the customary roller coaster ride typical of father-son relationships, but in music they forged their deepest bonds. A former violinist who spent a season with the San Antonio Symphony, Dan Wolfe raised his son Ben to love all sorts of music. "He introduced me to jazz," Ben explained. "He loved Monk. He loved Lester Young and Billie Holiday. And he taught me a lot about music, like the importance of making judicious decisions on the bandstand. He was not into showing off or playing extra notes for no apparent reason. He also had no problem letting me know what I needed to get together".

With *Fatherhood*, Ben made a conscious decision to step off the fast lane for a moment and make music of introspection and mourning. "I made this record in ways I knew my father would have encouraged." That meant choosing the best studio, the best musicians, self-funding the entire project, and making wise decisions throughout. "Even the way I'm playing on the record: not a lot of bass solos, just trying to play with a good feeling and a good sound. This record is about the overall sound of the ensemble."

Ben's use of strings on seven of the ten tracks beautifully unites the jazz and classical worlds father and son reveled in. This is not the first time Ben augmented his ensemble with a quartet of strings, but as a tribute to his father it takes on a new significance. As on two previous recording sessions, Ben drafted the Grammy-nominated and extraordinarily versatile violinist Jesse Mills to put together a stellar string quartet. Mills, in turn, recruited Georgy Valtchev, highly acclaimed for his symphonic and chamber music performances, and as a member of the Mark Morris Dance Group Music Ensemble and Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project; Kenji Bunch, a celebrated violist, composer, and artistic director of "Fear No Music"; and the world-renowned Wolfram Koessel, cellist of the American String Quartet and whose many collaborations include performances with Renée Fleming, Edgar Meyer, and tabla virtuoso Zakir Hussain.

The sound of the recording was an important part of Ben's vision, so he made the unorthodox decision to record without headphones and insisted that the band play together in the same room. As a result, the recording sounds rich and warm.

Ben's dream band brought together old collaborators with young phenoms who are charting a new path for the music. The opening track, "Blind Seven," features two brilliant young cats barely in their '20s—Immanuel Wilkins on alto and vibraphonist Joel Ross, whose resumes are already long and impressive. Rounding out the rhythm section is Venezuelan pianist/composer Luis Perdomo and drummer Donald Edwards,

who had been working together with Ben on and off for at least 25 years. “Blind Seven,” (a reference to the card game “spades,”) is a classic from the Ben Wolfe songbook first recorded in 1996. But this arrangement only bears a passing resemblance to its earlier boppish versions. Here the melody doesn’t come in until two minutes into the tune, as Wilkins and Ross trade complex angular phrases against the string quartet, which plays contrapuntally against the uptempo rhythm section and horn lines, and then moves into a short, lovely unaccompanied piece based on an eleven-note motive. This “Blind Seven” diverges so radically from the original that we might think of it as a new composition.

The ballad “Gone Now,” reflects on what is lost when relationships end. It can refer to lovers or partners or perhaps to losing a loved one. The lush string arrangement conjures a sense of nostalgia, capturing how our memories tend to hold on to warm tones. The young British tenor player, Ruben Fox, channels Lester Young with his light airy tone, slight vibrato, and elegant lyricism.

“Opener” is another Wolfe original. He first introduced the theme during a gig at Dizzy’s Club Coca-Cola and has reworked it for this session. There are no strings here; just a quintet consisting of the veteran rhythm section—Wolfe, Edwards, and the magnificent Grammy-nominated pianist/composer Orrin Evans. The front line consists of the great tenor saxophonist JD Allen and nineteen-year-old trumpeter Giveton Gelin, a native of the Bahamas who recently took the U.S. jazz scene by storm. Their rendition is tight and swinging. Like the song’s title, there are no wasted notes, no wasted noise, no ostentation. Indeed, they prove that the key to exciting music isn’t flamboyance or earsplitting volume. I think Dan Wolfe would have agreed.

The next track pays tribute to Ben’s son Milo and to the people who love him. Ben introduced everyone around Milo, especially fellow musicians, as “uncle,” and the circle included a female neighbor of theirs named Leslie whom he dubbed “Uncle Leslie.” “Uncle Leslie” is an exquisite slow-medium waltz featuring Gelin, Ross, Evans, and a gorgeous solo by Wolfe.

“The Enforcer” is titled for the late, great Maurice Lucas, the starting forward for the Portland Trailblazers when they won the NBA championship in 1977. While the track might be dedicated to Mr. Lucas, on this track Ben is doing the enforcing: directing very subtle tempo shifts, flawlessly executing a tricky unison passage with Ross, delivering just the right notes behind Allen and Ross’s solos.

Ben brings the strings back on the remaining five tracks, “It’s True” uses them to great romantic effect, rendering an absolutely gorgeous ballad evocative of those great torch songs of the 1950s. Ben describes the song as “a kind of sonic love letter.”

“The Kora La” is a mesmerizing piece of music. It should be clear from the opening 12-tone strings passage that this is no ordinary tune. Kora La refers to the mountain pass through the Himalayas linking China and Nepal. Exceeding an altitude of 15,000

feet, it is one of the highest drivable roads in the world and one of the oldest trade routes in the region. Ben shares the story behind the title and the composition: “The piece was originally commissioned by the National Jazz Museum in Harlem for the Harlem in the Himalayas Jazz Series and premiered at the Rubin Museum of Art. I have never recorded the entire 35-minute suite, titled “From Here I See,” but I did record the slow movement as the title track of my album “From Here I See” (2013). The title “The Kora La” came later - the string quartet’s opening reminded me of mountains, and the grooves that follow as the road through those mountains. But the real inspiration for the music was a book I was reading at the time: Alex Ross’s *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*, which beautifully tells the history of modern and experimental music.” Listen a few times and you’ll hear a capsule version of Ross’s history. Wolfe manages to capture several moments of 20th century music in eight minutes, twisting and turning and shifting from chamber music to modal harmonies to avant-garde dissonance. The piece works especially well because everyone plays so beautifully. It is truly a masterpiece.

“First Things First” slows down the tempo to the kind of fox trot cadence Thelonious Monk was so fond of. Trombonist Steve Davis, one of the elders here, joins Ross on the front line, backed by Perdomo, Edwards, Wolfe, and strings. The ensemble’s lyricism on this track is especially noteworthy.

“Edged” is another example of how adventurous Ben can be as a composer. Its very complex, angular melody is played in 9/4 time, except for brief passages where the rhythm shifts or is suspended. The melody passes from Ross to Perdomo to the strings and back, creating opportunities for more dynamic, conversational ensemble playing. The musicianship displayed on this track is something to behold. Mills, Valtchev, Bunch, and Koessel navigate the melody beautifully, and Ross and Perdomo communicate as if they had been playing together for years. Indeed, listening to Ross brought me back to Bobby Hutcherson on Eric Dolphy’s recording of “Hat and Beard,” another song with sections written in 9/4 time.

The closing track happens to be the only song Wolfe did not compose — “What’s New,” the 1939 standard composed by fellow bassist Bob Haggart with lyrics by Johnny Burke. On one hand, Ben remains loyal to the song’s roots as a slow, romantic ballad, not interested in using “What’s New” or any ballad, for that matter, as a vehicle for blowing. On the other hand, he beautifully reharmonized and rearranged the song in ways consistent with his generation. And yet, Ben somehow knew that this track, in particular, spoke to his dad. “My dad would have loved what we did with ‘What’s New.’”

I’m certain he would have loved it all.

--Robin D. G. Kelley

Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original