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## **‘Unjust’ by Ben Wolfe Review: Jazz, Swinging and Sophisticated**

**Trumpeter Nicholas Payton, saxophonist Immanuel Wilkins and others join the bassist on his new album, which offers finely balanced performances of a dozen original compositions.**



Ben Wolfe PHOTO: ANNA YATSKEVICH

Bassist Ben Wolfe long ago mastered the art of playing small-ensemble jazz. Yet he likes to think big. His 2004 release, “My Kinda Beautiful,” merged a jazz octet with an eight-piece string section. His music has often straddled jazz and chamber music, combining instrumentation characteristic of both genres. Sometimes, this has meant rethinking his own compositions. “Blind Seven,” the fast-paced, bebop-based original on his 1997 album, “13 Sketches,” gained new drama, courtesy of violins, viola and cello, on 2019’s “Fatherhood.” For a stretch, without losing its pulse, the song became a string-quartet fugue.

## BEN WOLFE UNJUST



Such experimentation has transformed Mr. Wolfe’s approach even without the string players. On his new release, “Unjust” (Resident Arts), out Friday, he leads seven musicians in varying configurations of jazz quartet, quintet and sextet through a dozen original compositions. The music has the spontaneity of the swinging jazz for which Mr. Wolfe is best known (his résumé includes work with mainstream standard-bearers including Wynton Marsalis and Harry Connick Jr.) as well as the structural integrity of through-composed chamber works. Its balance—of elegance and propulsion, of

accessibility and edge—distinguishes it from most conventional jazz. Its details reward repeated listening.

The ease and depth here owe mainly to the authority that Mr. Wolfe, now 60 years old, displays on his instrument—his sturdy tone and, particularly, his ingenuity with walking bass lines of differing feels: urgent on “The Heckler”; gracefully loping on “Hats Off to Rebay”; rich with melodic content on “Mask Man”; and full of shifting harmonic implications on “Sideways.” He plays just one brief and understated solo, on “Sparkling Red.” Yet, in a way, he treats each song like a painterly duet with drummer Aaron Kimmel.

It doesn’t hurt that Mr. Wolfe’s bandmates include some of jazz’s most compelling and versatile players. Trumpeter Nicholas Payton, at 49 years old, is among the most assured and creative jazz musicians of his generation, and his ambition is wide-ranging. Through his own Paytone label, he has released often daring music that spans jazz, pop, Latin, hip-hop and electronica. On recent albums for the Smoke Sessions label, he has achieved equally searching and searing ends in more conventional jazz contexts. His solos here, which often sound both relaxed and on the verge of something thrilling within a single passage, never lose sight of Mr. Wolfe’s melodies.

On the opening composition, “The Heckler,” Mr. Payton begins with terse melodic fragments that build in tension. By the song’s end, he reaches into his upper range, issuing tones that are sometimes soaring, sometimes wriggling, and either ringing in tone or evaporating into thin air.

On that track, alto saxophonist Immanuel Wilkins plays with equal force and his own fresh cache of ideas. As on his own celebrated recordings, Mr. Wilkins commands attention without seeming in search of a spotlight. He and vibraphonist Joel Ross, whose playing is elemental to nearly all of these tracks, are both in their 20s. They are invigorating presences on jazz’s landscape for the clarity of their statements and their distinctive sounds—pungent and soulful in Mr. Wilkins’s case, supple and glowing in Mr. Ross’s. In unison, on “Sparkling Red,” they sound like a single voice, only to split apart and play phrases that interlace in unexpected ways.

Pianist Addison Frei manages a deft tonal blend with Mr. Ross’s vibes on one track, the soft-spoken “Eventually.” Pianist Orrin Evans, a bold bandleader in his own right, has a particularly strong bond with Mr. Wolfe based on their past work together; playing in lockstep, the two shift harmonic colors to great emotional effect on “Lullaby in D,” behind the tenor saxophone playing of Nicole Glover, an impressive addition to Mr. Wolfe’s circle of collaborators.

“Bob French” is named for the New Orleans drummer Mr. Wolfe met while working in Mr. Connick’s band. Mr. Wolfe captures his sly manner and unshakable beat with this mid-tempo piece, which gains momentum through a trumpet-and-saxophone dialogue that grows wild and then fades out, like a parade turning a corner only to disappear. “Unjust” is a contrafact built on the chord changes of Thelonious Monk’s “Evidence” (which is itself a

contrafact of the standard “Just You, Just Me”). Yet one needn’t know that to hear Monk’s distinctive rhythmic displacements in the song’s form.

Mr. Wolfe recorded this new album during the third of three two-day sessions. The first two, involving some of these musicians plus expanded instrumentation (including a string quartet and a tuba), were devoted to two carefully plotted 35-minute suites. “Unjust” represents a more stripped-down and relaxed approach. Most of these tracks clock in between three and six minutes. Some are drawn from movements of the larger suites. As such, this new music may leave listeners pining for the more expansive works. Yet these compositions sound complete, like big ideas distilled into concise and satisfying statements.