

EXILE AND DISCOVERY

“Tradition” is one of those oft-encountered terms in discussions about jazz, which would threaten to be a meaningless buzz word if it weren’t so embedded in this music’s DNA. In jazz, you can run from tradition, or embrace it to the point where other options fade, but you can’t hide.

EXILE AND DISCOVERY, Saxophonist **Donny McCaslin**’s bold and beautiful debut as a leader, is a “traditional” jazz record on at least two counts. Yes, over the varied course of the project, he dishes up several standards, beginning with Benny Golson’s *Along Came Betty*, and including a fleet take on *Speak Low* and nicely spunked-up reading of Monk’s *Bye-Ya*. You can hear, in his fresh approach to timeless music, the evolved confidence of a player who has worked with Gary Burton, Steps Ahead, the Mingus Big Band, Danilo Perez, the Maria Schneider big band, George Gruntz, and others.

But it’s also evident from this recording that McCaslin also fully grasps the jazz tradition of bending the rules, of tugging at definitions and pushing the language towards personal expression. So it follows a twisty, individualized logic to hear *Tenderly* served up in 5/4 time, or to hear him waxing eloquent with two solo readings of *études* by the late great nuevo tango master, Astor Piazzolla, along with three original originals.

“I would say that I’m an avowed eclectic,” McCaslin admits, “but thinking about this record, just playing tunes and swinging, and trying to bring my eclectic influences into that setting – that’s really rewarding for me. Whenever I had a gig just playing standards, sometimes that’s the most fun playing I do. We’re playing those times in the tradition and all that, but then I’m also bringing all these psychotic influences into the mix, which, for me, makes it fun.”

On this first solo flight, McCaslin stretches out and digs in, with an ambi-style honed over years and considering a wide spectrum of what the saxophone has been. The ear catches fleeting glimpses of Johnnie Hodges and Sonny Rollins, and maybe some “out” remnants of Albert Ayler or Dewey Redman, but the character of the assembly is McCaslin’s.

Although recorded with a band McCaslin doesn’t regularly work with, and, in jazz tradition, on one fine day in the studio, **EXILE AND DISCOVERY** is an effort that reflects well on the leader’s sound as well as the rhythm section collective – drummer **Billy Drummond**, pianist **Bruce Barth** and bassist **Ugonna Okegwo**. Barth helped in some of the arrangements, and Drummond fine-tuned the rhythmic feel of the title cut.

McCaslin’s originals are neatly woven into the fabric of the album, from the ethereal poise of the title song to the organic funk direction of *Mountain Mama*. McCaslin, who cites the influence of Keith Jarrett’s *Belongings* album on that tune, also plays the song in his funk band, “F” Train.

McCaslin’s pensive ballad *A Prayer for Frances* pays homage to Frances Bolei, a friend of the family in Northern California whose early support for McCaslin resulted in the then-teenager’s playing a festival alongside Freddie Hubbard, and his being featured on a nationally-aired PBS special. “She died five or six years ago,” he explains. “It was heavy for me, because I felt she loved me in a seriously unconditional way, and it benefited my career a lot. I just wanted to dedicate this song to her, because I loved her.”

McCaslin began his musical trek in his beachfront hometown of Santa Cruz, California, where his father, a vibist and pianist offered a support system. Picking up tenor sax at twelve, Donny cut his teeth playing with his father, learning as he went. He recalls the time his dad was playing a blues in D, while the younger

played in G. “Obviously, there are similar notes within the two keys, but it wasn’t until I was in the middle of my solo that I realized that I was in the wrong key. One of the highlights of my early career,” he laughs. “An early brush with bitonality.”

Deepening jazz roots developed when he encountered Ellington/Strayhorn charts in his high school jazz band, and he wound up in Burton’s band for four years, starting while going to Berklee School of Music. His inclusion of the poetic Ellington/Strayhorn ballad *Isfahan* alludes to both formative experiences: “I actually didn’t play that song in high school, but Gary Burton used to play that tune when I was in the band. But I didn’t get to play on it. I had to sit on the sidelines for that one, and was thinking ‘that’s a bad tune. Let me play on it.’ So this is my chance.”

To date, McCaslin has appeared on many recordings, including projects with Steps Ahead, Argentine guitarist Fernando Tarres (who turned him on to the Piazzolla études heard on **EXILE AND DISCOVERY**), and, recently, with the adventurous group Lan Xang (with close musical compatriot, saxist Dave Binney, bassist Scott Colley, and drummer Jeff Hirshfield).

But exploring work as a leader has “been a desire of mine all along, but I felt that it was not something I wanted to rush into. I just wanted to be in New York and absorb all the things that are here, and play different people’s music. I figured that when the time was right, it would happen.” Hearing this balanced and provocative set of music, in and out of the jazz tradition, the time is right. And the future looks promising.

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