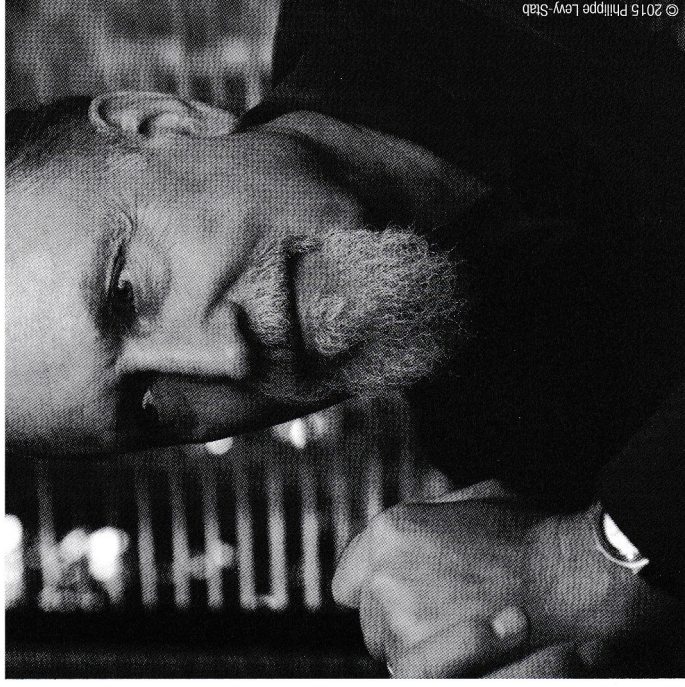


Exploring The Zone Where The Past Is Never Dead

By Joseph Woodard

Surveying the varied landscape of **John Scofield's** long and brilliant career, it makes sense to view his musical journey in terms of a multi-chaptered saga, in linear terms, or as a mosaic. Component parts and periods in the Scofield story make up the man and his musical voice, from his lesser-known but rich late '70s jazz trio work to the post-fusion of his solo work after playing with **Miles Davis** in the early '80s, to later ventures into the art of the artful groove (Überjam, work with Medeski, Martin and Wood, adventures in New Orleans-iana, etc.) and his career defining unit of trio jazz with **Steve Swallow** and **Bill Stewart** in the margins. Along the way, there have been fruitful collaborations with European artists, including the likes of highly jazz-conscious British composer **Mark-Anthony Turnage** and German pianist **Pablo Held**. He has made albums well-defined by the succinct titles *Loud Jazz* and *Quiet*.

All in all, it's been a long, strange, trippy, tangled and beautiful road, still going forward (and sideways). But one especially significant chapter within the overall expanse of Scofield's history came during an enlightened spread in the early '90s, when he found an inspired way to accommodate his love of "real" jazz in a blissful, mostly-acoustic setting with his old pal, tenor saxist **Joe Lovano**. Lovano engaged in a deeply empathetic relationship with the guitarist, as player and writer. Meanwhile, "do the right thing - and the wry thing" drummer **Bill Stewart** supplied deft and subtle rhythmic impetus, in cahoots with late acoustic bassist **Dennis Irwin**. The '90s-era Lovano-featured quartet produced three albums, *Time on My Hands*, *Meant to Be*, and *What We Do* (all album titles with righteously ripe meaning) and toured extensively before enthusiastic audiences. In retrospect, the quartet can be viewed as one of the great jazz groups of the late 20th century. Thankfully, with *Past Present*, a stunning collection of new Scofield songs wedded to the same format, that powerful electro-



acoustic quartet story continues, and feels and sounds more relevant than ever. From the first sonic washes of the slinky 5/4 soul-jazz tune “**Slinky**” to the closing title track’s blues variation (with squirrely double-up bass line attached), and the many shifting moods and creative notions in between, **Past Present** strikes the ear like an old friend, seasoned and wiser, but still teeming with bluesy mojo and a will to create something vibrantly new. It is the jazz credo in action, with soul and adventurism on the side.

Apart from the album 2003 *Oh!* by the band cleverly known as **ScoLoHoFo** (Scofield, Lovano, Dave Holland and Al Foster), and featuring compositions from all parties vs. the stylistic continuity and lingo of Scofield’s unique writing, the Scofield/Lovano pairing has been mostly out of public earshot. **Past Present** represents the thrilling continuation of a potentially poetic jazz tradition, after a twenty-plus year hiatus. Scofield says, “so much of that group’s sound came from drummer Bill Stewart. He played incredibly well for his age back in ‘89 when I first met

him and has gotten even better over the years. He propels the band like no other drummer I’ve experienced.”

Scofield, who intentionally left the pedals and FX at home for this date, explained the origins of the album: “I had this music and I knew I wanted to do an ‘acoustic jazz-ish’ record. Nobody that I’ve played with has ever played my tunes as good as Bill Stewart and Joe Lovano. They’re my favorite musicians. This group used to play with Dennis Irwin, who passed away. But we got Larry Grenadier. I’ve actually played with Larry a lot over time. He had done many gigs with me, as part of my group, when the record *Quiet* came out, years ago. We went on tour to back up that record, so Larry and I played together for about a year. I’m a big fan of his playing and he seemed to be a perfect choice for this record.”

Speaking of and thinking about time – both in historical terms and re: the elusive quality of musical time and memory – is key to appreciating the essence of **Past Present**, as well as its title. Said title is yet another brainstorm of John’s wife, Susan,

who has supplied many of the pithily witty song titles for Scofield’s songbook over the years. “She comes up with all the best song titles,” he readily admits.

“This record is past and present,” Scofield says, “on different levels. First of all, this is this group that played together in the past and here we are in the present. That’s one thing. We’re still here. We come from the past, but we’re in the present. Also, jazz music – and all good music – has roots in the past. What is the past and what is the present? I start to think that time has less meaning as I get older. There is a Faulkner quote about that (from *Requiem for a Nun*), that «the past is never dead. It’s not even past.»”

Scofield continues, asserting that “music is the history of humanity. When Susan said ‘past present,’ I flashed on how we’re in the past and the present at the same time. You don’t want to recite what you remember about the past. You want to be in this music that is vital right now. It turns out that so much of that is from the past.

All music is from the past. And all music is in the present when you’re doing it right, if you’re not just reciting.”

I suggest that the title also implies a kind of future think sensibility, the nature of life past the present tense. “I like that,” he laughs. “Thanks.”

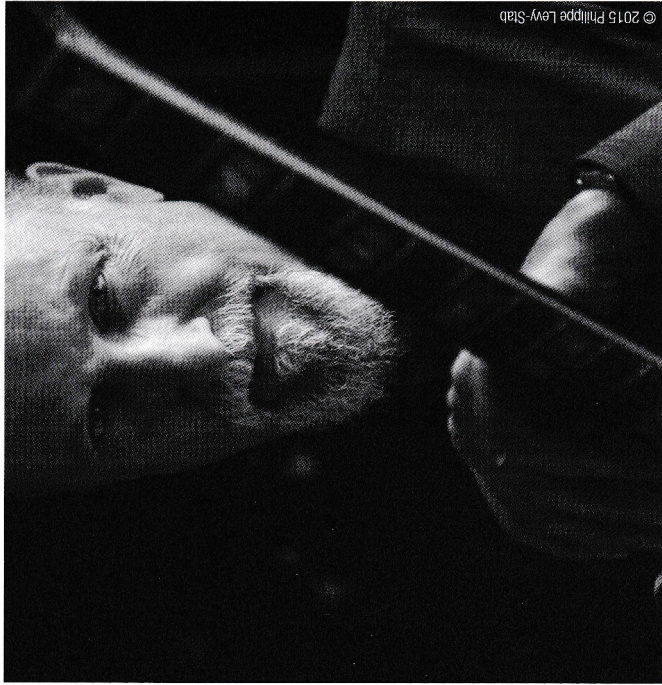
On a sad and personal note, some of the eye-catching song titles on **Past Present** pay tribute to John’s late son, Evan, who lost his battle with a swift and rare cancer in 2013 at the far-too-tender age of 26. A poet and writer, falling naturally into the family’s artistic lineage, Evan was also known for witty linguistic twists and his sayings/quips. “**Enjoy the Future!**” “**Get Proud.**” “**Weird Hands**” (a term for his feet) grace Scofield’s songs – many of them written during Evan’s illness. “**Mr. Puffy**” was an in-joking nickname for Evan during his chemotherapy, fitted on this album to a tune with a nice A section melody, and a tougher, puffier B section. “*Much of this music was composed during the short period when Evan and his partner Ursula were living with us as he was*

undergoing treatment. He was a constant in my mind. It was a bittersweet, poignant time to say the least. Is Evan only in the past because he's gone? Not at all. He's quite present with me."

In the first half of 2015 alone, Scofield's typically diverse agenda ranged from a tour with guitarist Warren Haynes' happening "Southern Rock" band Gov't Mule ("I think that was the loudest gig I ever played," he chuckles) to a series of dates with sensitive jazz pianist Pablo Held and trio in Europe, duo concerts with Jon Cleary and bouts with the Uberjam project. In the midst, he took this inspired, project-suitable songbook of tunes, written over the past few years and set aside for a special occasion, and went in with Lovano, Stewart and Grenadier rehearsed and recorded **Past Present**, all in three days. It was meant to be, apparently.

Throughout, Scofield shines, from his identifiable but never predictable soloing — and with the nuance of his touch all the more direct in the unaffected sonic purity

here — to the sensitivity, hipness and sheer infectiousness of his songcraft. Lovano moves fluidly with his characteristic inside/outside soloing mode, and applies expressive spirit to each melody statement. "Just the way Joe plays the melodies is incredible," Scofield comments. "You can write out a melody that means a lot to you and then somebody else can play it and it loses something. But Joe actually adds something to it. We have a real sound when we play together," Scofield comments about his abundant *sympatico* with . "The thing has just developed. I've known Joe since we went to Berklee (in the '70s). I remember when I first heard him, thinking «wow, this guy doesn't sound like the other hot tenor players, who are all trying to play like Michael Becker ala Coltrane, or like Coltrane, with Mike's approach. But Joe had this other thing happening, and I loved it. I've loved it ever since. It's so grounded in real jazz, as well as this expansive improviser vocabulary. It's astounding to me, actually."



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In terms of the compositional/interpretation approach on the album, Scofield offers "what I tried to do on this record, which was nice, was that each tune was from a little bit different bag, but we treat them all as jazz."

He achieves that goal, in different ways, song by song. On the unabashedly cheerful tune "Chap Dance", Scofield heads down a catchy tuneful path in the main part of the melody, but takes some quirky harmonic detours — in keeping with his gift of penning deceptively simple songs. Think of the akin melodic world of Ornette Coleman's "harmolodic folk" or Sonny Rollins' reinvention of "I'm an Old Cowhand." The song, says Scofield, "reminds me of that faux-western stuff from the '40s, from Oklahoma.' I envisioned guys dancing goofy on a Broadway stage, wearing cowboy hats and chaps. It's definitely a humorous thing. But then we play on rhythm changes, and what's more 'past present' than that?"

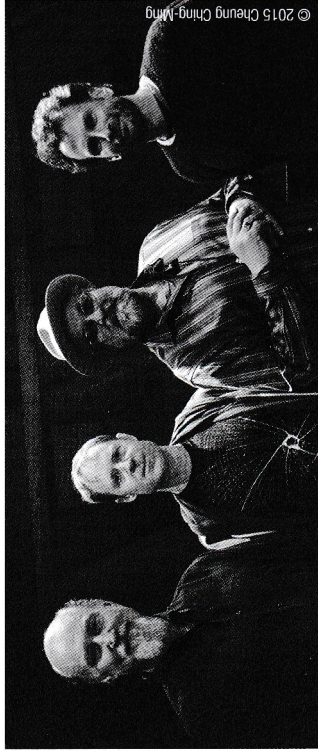
"Get Proud" goes a new Sco-soul-jazzy route, and "Enjoy the Future!" basks in a

light, sweet melodic glow, with a touch of rue. The pretty, bittersweet waltz, "Hangover", whose title stems from a lyric by Susan rather than the post-alcohol syndrome, demonstrates Scofield's special flair for ballad-writing, while "Season Creep" lives up to its title in the form of a slow and easy shuffle feel. "Museum", coming out of the melody stated on solo guitar before Lovano adds his reedy wisdom, moves to the beat of an unusual yet organic swing-meets-shuffle feel meted out by drummer Stewart. Of that hard-to-categorize rhythm, Scofield remembers that "this is what these guys just came up with. I wrote this song and they came up with this way of playing it. In the wrong hands, this song could just have died a quick death. But they were able to take this and make it into a special little feel."

Needless to say, the revival of this extra-special and never generic little band is something to celebrate and appreciate. The process of embarking on the renewed journey of this formidable and timeless quartet in 2015, Scofield says, "lets me

know that this music is alive with all of us and our ability and desire to play together is absolutely alive. You've got the past in it, but it's present, because it's new music, and new music is old again...

He pauses, and laughs at the paradox. "Old music is new and what the hell does



John Scofield, Bill Stewart, Joe Lovano, Larry Grenadier

old and new even mean? If it's fresh, it's fresh. Any new music that feels good has all kinds of old stuff in it. That's what music is. Any good music has roots, deep and all over the place."

Josef Woodard, June 9, 2015