

Bruce Escovitz Little Big Band

by Skoot Larson

The Bruce Escovitz Jazz Orchestra has a much bigger sound than you'd expect from ten players. The Orchestra's new recording, "Invitation," provides ten indisputable testimonies to this fact.

Other world-class jazz orchestras, like the Bob Florence Limited Edition or the Stockholm Jazz Orchestra, require nearly twice as many voices to achieve the orchestral timbre and fullness of sound in arrangements that Dr. Escovitz commands from his musicians. Add in fine improvisers like brass men Larry Williams, Jeff Jarvis and Andrew Lippman, guitarist Ian Robbins, the flute and saxophone wizardry of Billy Kerr and Dr. Bruce himself, and you have an ensemble that heralds a bright, new, and recognizable sound all their own.

The haunting title tune, "Invitation," has been performed by every big band out there, but never quite like this. A comfortable and flowing mid-tempo is set and driven by the percussive Latin beat of piano and drums as this delicate dream is woven. Enter Eskovitz' tenor to paint the melody line, which is then restated by trumpets. Mark Balling's ivories float the bridge over a shouted brass background. A grand trumpet and trombone interlude restates the theme following solo work by Eskovitz himself. Piano and tenor fade the song out; the piano repeating a chant-like line for the tenor saxophone to ride-off into the sunset.

Eskovitz original "Latin Fever," starts with the burn of a hot chili-pepper. Constructed on the Cuban *charanga* rhythm of Balling's piano and Angel Figueroa's conga drums, the saxes state the tunes torrid theme. Balling's piano chant invites trumpets to enter. Brass men Larry Williams and Jeff Jarvis scream a soaring chase across their high registers. Balling maintains the burn with a piano solo that never forgets its passion-filled, driving Cuban line. As piano reverts to its descant Latin figure, Figueroa takes the spotlight for a few percussive licks of his own. Although Dr. Bruce composed "Latin Fever" many years ago for a school project, it still cries out as one of his master compositions, sure to excite any crowd.

Count Basie is honored by Eskovitz' composition and arrangement, "A Walk in the Park." The band captures that relaxed, laid-back style used by the Count for slow moving dance numbers. And, just as Basie would have done in his own organization, Eskovitz provides plenty of space for soloists! Jeff Jarvis, Andrew Lippman, and Eskovitz each do their own swinging thing, followed by an improvised statement of rare beauty by contrabassist Adam Cohen.

Every track on this disc rates with the finest jazz ever, from the waltz-time "Damien's Dance" to Eskovitz' tribute to Sonny Rollins, "Just in the 'Newk' of Time."

The finale, "One Last Time" caps this five-star session with a soulful, gospel flare. The good doctor's tenor preaches a stirring sermon over some brilliantly churchy organ by Mark Balling. Larry Williams adds testimony with his reassuring trumpet before Eskovitz steps back on to the pulpit to drive his message of salvation home. Any audience with a feeling for the music in their soul should, at this point, be hollering "Amen" in stunned amazement from the performance they have just witnessed.

Good arranging calls on a broad and well-disciplined imagination: Think of soloing creatively on ten instruments simultaneously. Dr. Bruce Eskovitz' paintbrush fills each of these ten musical canvases like an old master. Please, Dr. Bruce, we want more of this!

The Bruce Eskovitz Jazz Orchestra CD, "Invitation," is available online from Tower Records (www.towerrecords.com), Barnes and Noble (www.barnesandnoble.com), and from Dr. Eskovitz' web site, www.bruceeskovitz.com.