

“Yesterday and Today” With The Admiral

by Skoot Larson

Jack Nimitz has to be one of the most under-rated musicians in jazz. From Nimitz’ first professional appearance with the band of drummer Joe Theimer in 1951, he has been a solid modern player with a full-bodied bari sound and a complete command of the big instrument. Since he moved West in 1960, Nimitz’ big horn has been a fixture on the studio scene, as well as the sax section’s low-register anchor for great bands like Stan Kenton, Gerald Wilson, The Terry Gibbs Dream Band and Supersax. Nimitz’ baritone can also be heard on the recordings of pop stars like Madonna, the Beach Boys, Barry Manilow, and Sammy Davis Jr.

It is unfortunate that, while playing behind so many other performers, motion pictures and television shows, Jack Nimitz rarely found his way into the recording studio to lead a group of his own. Nimitz’ recording career in his own name appears to have begun in 1995 with a quartet disc, “Confirmation.”

On the side of good fortune, jazz fan and entrepreneur Jordi Pujol of Barcelona, Spain has discovered reel-to-reel tapes of a Jack Nimitz session from 1957. Nimitz’ group at that time included trombonist Bill Harris in the front line before a pick-up rhythm section that included, over the three days in the studio, Jimmy Raney, Kenny Burrell or Chuck Wayne holding down the guitar chair, bassists Oscar Pettiford and Ross Saunders sharing contrabass duties, and the drums of Don Lamond and Ted Sommer. Two violins and three cellos added a unique quality to the music on this early date.

Pujol has combined this 50s album with Nimitz’ most recent efforts, a two-baritone band that features up-and-coming bari-man Adam Schroeder in the line-up and a rhythm section of pianist John Campbell, Dave Carpenter on bass and Joe LaBarbara playing drums. The new CD on Pujol’s Fresh Sound Records is appropriately entitled “Yesterday and Today.”

The “yesterday” side opens this disc with Nimitz and Harris blowing solid bebop on “Long Ago and Far Away” right out of the box. It is a classic bop sound that should have garnered attention from the jazz illuminati on its vinyl release fifty-plus years ago. Both

men work harmonic magic on the changes in sterling form. Fours are traded to bring this medium-quick standard to an end.

The most interesting songs on this date, however, are the handful treated to a “third-stream” style by the inclusion of the string section into to foreground line-up. On “You and the Night and the Music,” and “Softly, As In a Morning Sunrise,” violins and cellos share the melody line with the horns, the strings taking the bridge on the former. “Somebody Loves Me,” and “Lean On Me,” feature solos by one of the violinist as well, probably Gene Orloff, as he is listed in the lead chair for the string section.

“Love Nest,” known to many as the George Burns and Gracie Allen theme is the most fun of the selections on the first part of this CD. The theme is first stated in a quartet style with Nimitz out front and what sounds like a ‘pre-Paris’ Jimmy Raney feeding the chords. Bill Harris joins the line-up at solo time and stays to the end. The guitarist (Raney?) and the bassist also sound their axes for interesting solo work, although the bass sticks closely to a unique ‘improvised walking.’ Four bar riffs are traded, and Harris’s trombone puts a counterpoint line behind Nimitz’ exiting statement of the theme.

The album’s “Today” side matches Nimitz with Adam Schroeder, a newer hard bop cat on the scene and about half Nimitz’ age. Right away one can hear the admiration of Nimitz style in Schroeder’s work as in some places, if the two baritones weren’t coming from separate channels, it would be difficult to tell them apart! Nimitz timbre stands out as just a shade more brittle so the discerning ear can keep track. In their ideas, these two giants-of-the-big-horn are an even match, like a pair of chess grand master’s going head-to-head. Both men constantly come up with melodic, flowing ideas that easily hold the listener’s interest.

Music on the “today” side includes selections long associated with the bebop movement started by Dizzy, Yard and Monk up at Minton’s Playhouse in Harlem, like “Groovin’ High,” “Well, You Needn’t,” and “Bernie’s Tune,” as well as Nimitz lines over the changes to “Just Friends” and “All the Things You Are.” All of the tracks on this half of the record bring forth a bountiful batch of bop from the two baritones.

Mike Barone’s “Waltz This!” stands out as a fine example of this pair’s serious-fun take on the music. Carpenter’s bass riffs a short intro, joined after a couple bars by Campbell’s piano. Schroeder lays down the tune for the first eight, with Nimitz adding

some harmonies behind the melody's second run-through. Both men share the bridge, with Nimitz' horn stating the theme once more and then stepping into the spotlight. Schroeder waltzes in for a turn with his own take, slightly leading the beat using a magnificent construction of quarter notes and triplets. The two big horn masters then joust a couple choruses semi-unison that book-end some sixteen bars of Campbell's keyboard before the tune's closing restatement.

A true joy throughout the Nimitz-Schroeder portion of this CD is their free-form duets! There haven't been two musicians so suited to this type of two-voice soloing since the improvisational sparring of Lars Gullin and Rolf Berg in the fifties, Berg on alto tête-à-tête Gullin's baritone.

"Polka Dots and Moonbeams," the only slow selection here provides a comfortable vehicle for Nimitz to show his mellow side. Nimitz' hard edge softens to a sweet, slight vibrato timbre as his axe croons this Burke-Van Heusen standard, Schroeder coming in for the melody's last sounding.

The current session goes out in a cooking frenzy, taking the standard "It's You or No One" at breakneck speed, tossing melody and harmony between the deep, sonorous saxes like a volleyball in play. Campbell's piano teases with the first solo efforts before Nimitz enters in a cascade of rapid hemi-demi-semi-quavers. Schroeder is right behind Nimitz' solo with a couple fast and tuneful choruses to hold his own. Carpenter's bass work keeps the kettle on boil as the two baritones do free jazz duet battle right to the last note.

"Yesterday and Today," from Jack and friends is a fine example of just that! The third stream ideas of the "Yesterday" are a priceless moment of history, from a seldom-cited music pioneer. Most the established credit for the mix of classical and jazz has gone to John Lewis, Gunther Schuller and Jimmy Giufre. The early sides here-in show Nimitz to be a fine and inventive component of this experimental sound, right up there with the recognized masters.

This album is widely distributed, and should be available from most jazz retailers. If you have trouble finding "Yesterday and Today," go to www.freshsoundrecords.com, and you can buy it directly from the label.