

## “View From Afar” Offers a Wide Vista

by Skoot Larson

While jazz is considered an American art form, it is a flexible musical medium easily adapted to almost any instrument or setting. Many artists have brought sounds and styles from across the globe to the improvisational world of jazz. In the 1950s, Lars Gullin broadened the musical horizon by performing jazz based on Swedish folk tunes. In the 60s, Yusef Lateef and Herbie Mann brought sounds and instruments from the Middle East into the genre. Drum maestro Bill Plummer merged jazz with the classical music of India in the 70s.

Larry Steen, an excellent bass player as well as a man with a broad musical outlook is once more expanding the jazz language with his World Jazz Ensemble. Their CD, “**View From Afar**,” is an audio trip around the world, with jazz artists joining native players to forge ahead into new ground. Not content to create new music from the sounds of other lands, Steen often juxtaposes sounds of one region into the music of another.

The first cut of this disc, Whelan’s Jig,” presents a grand example of improvisation on a traditional Irish jig with the sound of traditional *Uilleann pipes* enhanced by African bones and a frame drum from Cameroon. On the old Hebrew standard “Misirlou,” reed flute, Oud and frame drums weave a background for a solo by a clarinet in the key of “G.” Other cuts work with tradition sounds and rhythms from Greece, Chili, Argentina, Turkey, the Balkan States and the island of Bali.

A special favorite is “Dervish Land,” set to a ten beat rhythmic pattern. This 1-2-3 -1-2-1-2-1-2-3 pattern is then overlaid with a minor-key melody using the Eastern Mediterranean *Niaventi* scale. The tune pits clarinet against the bouzouki, a long necked sort of Greek mandolin, over the very sensitive piano riffs of young lion Tamir Handelman.

Other cuts worthy of special mention are a lovely Hebrew ballad, “*Shoshanat Ha’ Erev*,” or “Rose of Evening,” featuring a reed flute from Armenia called a *Duduk* and acoustic guitar. On this lovely flowing song Larry Steen plays a fretless base.

I also especially enjoyed “Second Wind,” a classic Brazilian *partido alto* transformed to a sort of samba-funk that feature the flute of Ernie Watts and the electric guitar of Robben Ford. Here, Larry Steen play electric bass, and the unique barking sound of the Brazilian *cuica* friction drum sets the mood.

Although you will find your own favorites among these track, all the songs are unique and interesting, with captivating rhythms and fine solo work. If you are open minded enough to enjoy out-of-the-mainstream jazz, and I think most true jazz fans are, this is a CD must for your collection! Hopefully, Larry Steen and his amazing ensemble are working on another such project. I definitely want to hear more of these explorations!