

Tomas Janzon's New Recording Shows Tri-Coastal Originality

by Skoot Larson

Jazz music has grown and matured in the Scandinavian countries on a parallel course with America. Over a century ago, touring minstrel shows peeked the curiosity of Swedes, followed by an interest in American popular music throughout the so-called "Jazz Age" of the roaring twenties. By the 30s, American records regularly found their way to Sweden, and Swedish musicians began adapting jazz to their own cultural setting. Tomas Janzon follows that lineage of grand jazz emanating from the far north.

On his latest outing, "Coast to Coast to Coast," Janzon offers a tri-coastal contrast, working with three different groups in as many settings. Each group builds on a set of Janzon's own compositions, and in each case it almost seems the tunes were written with the instrumentation of the group in mind. Janzon's arrangements are a well-fitting glove on the hand of each set of musicians.

In what this writer sees as his most interesting set, recorded in Janzon's native city, Stockholm, the guitarist interacts with marimba artist Birger Thoreli, bassist Lars Ekman and drummer Ali Djeridi. The guitar-marimba unison melodic statements on "The Croak" and "The Hearness," create an interesting tonal effect within the impish feel of these songs. On "The Croak," the instrumental interplay is set over a chanting bass line that builds just the right tension to keep things flowing well.

"Wescology," from this same session is Janzon's homage to Wes Montgomery, whom Janzon cites as a strong influence on his playing. His solo here employs a mix of linear runs and sliding full-voiced chords much like Wes Montgomery's trademark style.

The New York session, with Janzon's strings set against the deeper bass tones of Ken Filiano and Ben Dixon's drum kit, deliver a darker, more haunting side to Janzon's music. The creation entitled "Four AM" conjures a lonely 'film noir' feel. As the strings of Janzon's guitar and Filiano's bass interact over Dixon's restless tom-toms, one can almost see the black-and-white images of cheap detectives, leggy blondes and solitary hotel rooms. The last song in this set, "A Week from Now," wears a similar mood.

Janzon's regular West Coast band paints canvases from Janzon's cerebral style of composing, juxtaposing rhythms within and against rhythms finding an 'outside' variety of sound that invites attention with its flowing harmonies. Pianist William Henderson delivers a very tasty solo on the title "Diminued," and "The Day Before" displays more love of the Wes Montgomery style in a craft interplay of voices with Henderson's piano and Janzon's guitar intertwined with Jeff Littleton's contrabass and the drums of Tony Austin.

Throughout this fine disc Janzon improvises with the mind of a composer building ideas with his instrument's full range of possibilities; making exceptional use of his six-string ability for multiple tones and harmonies. This group, which is a regular feature around the Los Angeles area, is even more fun and interesting to see live. One can view as well as sense the strong bond of musicianship between Janzon, Littleton and Austin.

"Coat to Coast to Coast" is available from cdbaby.com and it is music well worth hearing and owning. Tomas Janzon, who is an educator as well as a guitarist and composer is making a strong mark on the international jazz scene and we are lucky that he spends much of his time here in the LA area where we can hear his West Coast band often. More information about upcoming dates can be found at www.tomasjanzon.com or at www.cliquehear.com.