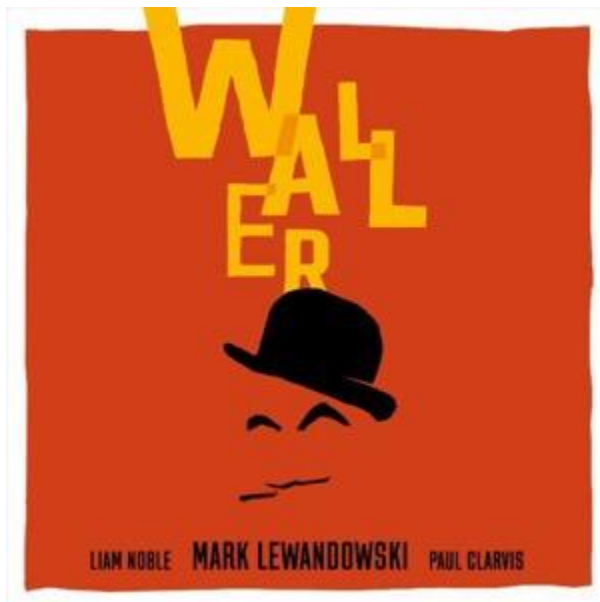




Album Reviews

Mark Lewandowski 'Waller' (Whirlwind Recordings) 5/5

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Any album that includes Paul Clarvis in the line-up simply has to be fun. This album certainly is that. Here we have a trio under the leadership of bassist Mark Lewandowski and also featuring Liam Noble at the piano. Mark is a new name to me so here's a little about him. He hails from Nottingham and has arrived on the London jazz scene comparatively recently having studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, whilst also gigging around the capital. Amongst his tutors have been Steve Watts and Michael Janisch. So it's really no surprise that Mark's debut album is released on his mentor's

label.

Now established as an in-demand sideman, he has been able to work in a variety of settings, from straight ahead to contemporary, original and improvised music.

It looks like 2017 is set to be Mark's year as he is currently touring the music from this album during April and May.

Thomas 'Fats' Waller was certainly a colourful, larger- than- life character. The one thing that seemed to pervade all of his music was a humour and light-heartedness. He wrote many songs during his career, a lot of which have become staples of the jazz and popular song repertoire. However, above all he was an entertainer.

Waller was most active during the 1920's and 1930's and died in 1943 at the age of 39. This collection of Waller's tunes seeks to re-dress the songs in 21st Century clothing. Not for this trio the Harlem stride style, but something more contemporary. Sometimes it seems that we are seeing the work of Fats Waller through the prism of Thelonious Monk.

Each song is dismantled and then carefully re-assembled, musical brick by musical brick but with due reverence to the original.

As in much of Waller's work, the musicians here sound happy and relaxed. It's a particular delight to hear Clarvis using brushes throughout the album. This is an intimate meeting of minds and one feels at times that one is almost eaves dropping on a personal three way conversation. But then, such is the creativity of the musicians that they draw the listener into their dialogue.

Listening to Noble, I realise that he has a wry sense of humour similar to Clarvis and they therefore make the ideal partnership for this project.

Authentic samples of Waller's own voiced introductions seems to add a certain authenticity to the performances.

Eleven Waller tracks and a final piece written by Jelly Roll Morton make up the album contents.

An almost free-form introduction ushers in the opening track 'Lulu's Back in Town' and then Noble's impish piano enters ushering in the familiar theme aided and abetted by Clarvis' skittering brushwork. The musical icing is provided by the leader's propulsive bass underpinning the whole.

Every track is a musical gem, but I particularly enjoyed 'Jitterbug Waltz'. Noble's solo delicately deconstructing the well-worn melody, and the leader's bass solo which follows is the epitome of good taste.

The trio build up a fantastic head of steam on 'Blue Because Of You' and we get a nice arco bass solo too.

'Fair and Square...in Love' is another proposition entirely beginning with the sound of Waller himself and concluding with very considered and stately playing, not at all how Waller would have played the tune. The sound here is reminiscent of one of the many Scandinavian jazz trios which seem to abound at the moment.

The musicians cleverly intertwine two of Waller's best known tunes on 'It's a Sin to...Write a Letter' to great effect. Clarvis' solo on this track is nothing less than outstanding.

Lewandowski's tour de force is a solo bass rendition of 'Have A Little Dream on Me'. A miniature delight.

'Ain't Misbehavin'" is another track where the musicians lead the listener up a rather mysterious byway before stating the melody.

Waller himself introduces 'Honeysuckle Rose' before the protagonists stamp their own musical identities on the piece.

The concluding track is 'Why' by Jelly Roll Morton and features a vocal, I imagine, by the leader.

I have said before that jazz does not necessarily have to be thrusting and original to have merit and I stand by that comment. These are totally fresh interpretations of Fats Waller classics but still manage to stay faithful to the original compositions. For me the best jazz displays humour and musical empathy in equal measure and this album has this in abundance. Who would have thought it possible to have a smile on one's face continuously for almost 50 minutes?

If ever you are feeling down listen to this album and your mood will lift instantly.

Alan Musson