

JAY MCSHANN
Going to Kansas City

New World Records 80358

**with GUS JOHNSON JR., BUDDY TATE,
JULIAN DASH, GENER RAMEY**

Going to Kansas City

Jay McShann secured a lasting place in jazz history on April 30, 1941, when he became the first bandleader to usher Charlie Parker into a studio for a commercial recording session. For years, that was how McShann was remembered, if at all--as an early benefactor of the most influential figure in modern jazz. Shamefully, it took the jazz literati three decades to recognize Bird's old boss as a dynamic force himself.

McShann's advocacy of Parker was hardly his only distinction as a bandleader. A riffing powerhouse in the Kansas City mode of Benny Moten, Count Basie, and Andy Kirk, the Jay McShann Orchestra was the last of the Southwestern "territory" outfits to go national. Its soloists, Parker excepted, may have lacked the charisma of their Basie counterparts, but its arrangements (especially those by Skippa Hall and William Scott) were frequently more imaginative than the Basie band's while no less rough-and-tumble. In Walter Brown, McShann boasted a mighty blues shouter--although this asset proved something of a mixed blessing when Brown's gutsy performance of "Confessin' the Blues" became a surprise "race" hit, causing record producers to demand more of the same at the expense of the band's jumping instrumentals.

But despite the success of "Confessin' the Blues," McShann's band never permanently captured the public's fancy. After folding the band in 1944, upon being drafted into the Army, McShann labored in semi-obscurity for twenty-five years, playing the blues and boogie-woogie in Kansas City and California, and making several unsuccessful bids to launch another big band.

McShann--long associated with Kansas City although born in Muskogee, Oklahoma--never really disappeared, so he was never actually "rediscovered." But in the early 1970s, he was one of the veterans who began to enjoy newfound attention as a result of reawakened interest in Kansas City swing and other pre-bop styles. Ironically, the numerous solo and small-group records he has made since then have enabled him to show off in a way he was rarely permitted on the sides with his big band. Two years shy of his eightieth birthday, McShann remains a witty, driving pianist who, though slightly more generous with filigree than Basie (the influence of Art Tatum and Earl Hines?), brings a similar stringency to the effusions of boogie-woogie and stride.

Going to Kansas City--arguably the finest flower of McShann's late bloom--was recorded in 1972, seven years before his appearance in the film *The Last of the Blue Devils* solidified his rank among jazz elders. In his liner notes for the original MJR release, the producer Bill Weilbacher explained the inspiration for teaming McShann with Buddy Tate and the late Julian Dash: "First, because tenor saxophones can be terrific blues instruments and blues and McShann go together; second, because tenor saxophones are great riffing instruments and riff tunes are a very important part of the Kansas City tradition; third, because two tenors with a rhythm section is a rather unusual instrumentation and we thought that it would likely stimulate the players in its novelty; and fourth, because we imagined that Jay McShann's

right hand would function very much like a brass choir in this instrumentation, tending, therefore, to put this aspect of his style into focus."

The strategy was successful on all four counts, and there are especially colorful examples of the sort of call-and-response that Weilbacher envisioned on "Say Forward, I'll March," and "Doggin' Around," the former an overlooked item from McShann's big-band book, the latter one of three tunes borrowed from the classic Basie repertoire. Because Dash favored a tone as brusque and ripe and Herschel Evans-like as Tate's, the battle lines on this version of "Doggin' Around" aren't as clearly drawn as on the original, which featured Evans and Lester Young. Still, the roar of friendly rivalry is clearly audible throughout the program, and McShann is just the man to egg the combatants on. (Unless I miss my guess, Tate precedes Dash on "Hootie's in Hutchinson," "Say Forward, I'll March," and "Four Day Rider," with the order reversed on the remaining four titles. Surprisingly, despite his fealty to Evans as a tenorist, Tate's swooping clarinet solo on "Blue and Sentimental" resembles Young's work on that instrument, in timbre as well as lyric confidentiality.)

Weilbacher's other masterstroke was to reunite McShann with Gene Ramey and Gus Johnson, the bassist and drummer from his big band (and teammates after that, too, with Basie in the early 1950s). According to Weilbacher, these three men hadn't played together for twenty-nine years--something one would never guess from their easy interplay on "Hootie's in Hutchinson" and "Hootie's Ignorant Oil," two tracks in which Ramey's earthy locomotion, Johnson's dapper shuffle, and McShann's rollicking cross-rhythms lead one to suspect that the matrimony of rumba and boogie-woogie so crucial to the birth of rock 'n roll was performed in Kansas City, Not New Orleans. When McShann was leading his big band, there was little call for him to sing the blues--not with the irrepressible Walter Brown nearby. But in his maturity, McShann has emerged as a sly, ingratiating vocalist, an aspect of his talent displayed to telling advantage on "Four Day Rider" and "Hootie's Ignorant Oil."

Going to Kansas City was a treasure in 1972, in part because albums by McShann were then so scarce. It remains a treasure, even though there is no longer a shortage of McShann on record. Music as savvy, exuberant, and timeless as this will always be a rare commodity.

—Francis Davis

Francis Davis is the jazz critic for *The Atlantic* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and the author of *In the Moment: Jazz in the 1980s* (Oxford University Press).

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Ricker, Bruce (producer and director). *The Last of the Blue Devils*. Rhapsody Films, 1979.

Produced by Bill Weilbacher
 Engineer: Roger Rhodes
 Recorded March 6, 1972,
 National Recording Studios, New York
 Prepared for reissue by Arthur Moorhead
 Compact Disc mastering: New York Digital Recording, Inc.

Publishers (all ASCAP except *BMI/ASCAP):

Doggin' Around: Popular Music Co.

Hootie's Ignorant Oil: MCA Music Publishing, a div. of MCA, Inc./Fisher Music Co.

Blue and Sentimental: Bregman, Vocco and Conn/Hallmark Music Co./Harry von Tilzer Music Publishing Co.

Hootie's in Hutchinson: MCA Music Publishing, a div. of MCA, Inc./Fisher Music Co.

Say Forward, I'll March: MCA Music Publishing, a div. of MCA, Inc./Fisher Music Co.

Four Day Rider: MCA Music Publishing, a div. of MCA, Inc./Fisher Music Co.

**Moten Swing*: Peer International/Fisher Music Co.

- 1- Doggin' Around (6:10)
(Evans-Battle)
- 2- Hootie's Ignorant Oil (4:25)
(McShann-Anderson)
- 3- Blue and Sentimental (6:28)
(Basie-Livingston-David)
- 4- Hootie's in Hutchinson (6:04)
(McShann-Parker-Brown)
- 5- Say Forward, I'll March (4:42)

(Ramey-Hall-McShann)
6- Four Day Rider (4:00)
(McShann-Brown)
7- Moten Swing (6:25)
(Moten-Moten)

Jay McShann, piano & vocals
Buddy Tate, tenor saxophone & clarinet
Julian Dash, tenor saxophone
Gener Ramey, bass
Gus Johnson, Jr., drums

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NEW WORLD RECORDS
16 Penn Plaza #835
NEW YORK, NY 10001-1820
TEL 212.290-1680 FAX 212.290-1685
Website: www.newworldrecords.org
email: info@newworldrecords.org

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