

THE VANGUARD JAZZ ORCHESTRA New World Records 80534

The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra's preeminence is a well-kept secret. In a good year, the band manages to inch into the cellars of the popularity polls. This CD is its first recording in seven years.

The roots of the VJO go back to 1966, when cornetist-composer-arranger Thad Jones and drummer Mel Lewis formed an ensemble that dazzled the jazz world and set new standards for big bands. In 1979, Jones left the band and moved to Denmark; he led the Danish Radio Orchestra and--for a year--the Count Basie Orchestra, until his death in 1986. Mel Lewis continued the Jones-Lewis band, calling it Mel Lewis and the Jazz Orchestra, until his death in 1990. Lewis continued to play Jones's timeless music, and just as important, he kept his library fresh with challenging new contributions from Bob Brookmeyer and others. He also continued the band's Monday-night performances at New York's Village Vanguard, an unmatched tradition that began on February 7, 1966.

After Lewis died, the band was at a crucial juncture. Few would have blamed them if they had decided to call it an era and disband, but they chose a more difficult and courageous path. Renamed the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, they held fast to their Monday-night base and formed a not-for-profit corporation, Sixteen As One Music, Inc. They also appointed Jim McNeely, the band's pianist from 1978 to 1984, as composer in residence. And in January 1996, McNeely returned to the piano chair.

Shortly before McNeely resumed his pianistic duties, the VJO made him an offer: Write an album's worth of music. McNeely's career path had prepared him well for this imposing venture; he had been playing with and writing distinctive material for the small groups of Stan Getz and Phil Woods, and he had become one of the favorite composer-arrangers of the WDR band in Cologne and the Stockholm Jazz Orchestra. All of this experience, plus writing for the VJO and the Carnegie Hall Jazz Band, had enabled him to develop a singular personality as a composer.

McNeely freely acknowledges the deep influences of Thad Jones and Bob Brookmeyer on him, and the echoes are easy to hear--the benefits of having had both as mentors cannot be overstated. But there's an important aspect to McNeely's music that comes from his being a contemporary rhythm-section player. Many of his best pieces are built from the bottom up--that is, with the rhythm section as the foundation--then he integrates that section with the rest of the band in all sorts of provocative ways. "Extra Credit," "Lickety Split," "Absolution," "Sticks," "Reflection," and "Mel" are all good examples of this kind of thinking. McNeely has total command of the harmony, colors, and textures available from a jazz orchestra, plus a superior sense of form and development.

The opener, "Extra Credit," is an ideal introduction to Jim's rhythm-oriented compositional methods, here with a drum-based melody and piano-bass unisons. "Thad" is both an affectionate tribute and a tongue-in-cheek tour de force. The piece begins with a musical quote from Jones's "Quietude," but the quote-a-thon really begins in earnest right after John Mosca's trombone solo. In one 40-measure chorus (plus the beginning of another), McNeely trots out a dozen excerpts from Thad's compositions and arrangements. In order of appearance, these quotes are from "Three and One," "Little Rascal on a Rock," "Mean What You Say," "A--That's Freedom," "Tiptoe," "The Groove Merchant," "Don't Git Sassy," "Fingers," "Once Around," "61st and Rich'id," and again, "Don't Git Sassy," and "Three and One." A later shout chorus has another moment from "Mean What You Say," and the piece ends with a unison trombone "dot" from "A Child Is Born." All in

all, this is a warm dedication with just the right touches of humor, à la Eddie Sauter's 1954 "The Loop" for the Sauter-Finegan Orchestra.

"In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning" is the disc's only standard; McNeely's off-center reharmonization takes a little getting used to. The composer's verbal description of "Lickety Split" is perfect; listen and enjoy. "Absolution," contains passages that remind one of Gregorian chant, and the antiphonal one-or-two-measure dialogues between each horn player and the ensemble are based on sixteenth century call-and-response.

"Sticks" is an expansion (as opposed to mimicry) of Duke Ellington's concepts. It contains, among other things, some colorful reed passages scored for two clarinets, soprano, tenor, and baritone. Originally written for Phil Woods and the WDR band, "Reflection" here features the very different but equally compelling talents of Billy Drewes. Concluding the disc is "Mel," which could be subtitled "Adventures in Quarter Notes." It continues one of the band's traditions, begun by Thad Jones in "A--That's Freedom" and furthered by Bob Brookmeyer in what I call his Quarter Note Trilogy: "Hello and Goodbye," "Make Me Smile," and "The American Express." Note the striking blend that the ensemble attains--the kind possible only from a group with extraordinary talent and years of playing together.

Quiet as it's been kept, Jim McNeely is one of the most impressive jazz composers to emerge in the past decade, and he couldn't have a better ensemble to play his writing than this one. One of the greatest big bands in jazz history isn't just history. It's right now, and still growing. Proof enclosed.
—Bill Kirchner

Bill Kirchner is a composer-arranger, saxophonist, educator, record producer, and leader of the Bill Kirchner Nonet.

About the Music

"Wagner's music is better than it sounds." --*Mark Twain*

While I'm flattered to think that someone might actually want to know more about what's actually going on in the music on this disc, I believe that it may be up to a more disinterested party, equipped with real analytical tools, to thoroughly take this material apart, or to even decide whether it's worth the effort in the first place.

Having said that, I will admit that there is a little light I might be able to shed on the makeup of these pieces. After all, even the worst "elevator music" is the result of some human being making decisions about form, rhythm, and pitch. And I wrote the stuff on this CD. So here goes:

1) *Extra Credit*

Two ideas are at the core of this piece. First, the drum part is the central focus. Drummer John Riley is playing constantly, creating a long rhythmic line, from which hang different melodic, harmonic, and solo sections, much like laundry on a line.

The second organizing idea is the form. For lack of a better term, I call it a "moving rondo." It goes like this: **A-B-C-X¹-B-C-D-X²-C-D-E-X³-D-E-F-X⁴-E-X⁵-A**. X is a IIIm7-V7 solo vamp which is

transposed up a whole step every time it appears. The *X* vamp also provides the underpinning of the “shout” chorus. Each time a section reappears it is orchestrated in a slightly different way.

The idea for this form came to me in the shower, which I find to be a fertile place for thinking.

2) *Thad*

I wanted to write a piece that related strongly to Thad Jones in ways both general and specific.

Generally, Thad brought feelings of joy, intensity, drama, and surprise to his music. There is also the inescapable fact that his music swings: this is due not only to the performers, but is also written in the music. In “Thad” I tried to capture the feeling of some of his greatest pieces, such as “Don’t Get Sassy,” “Mean What You Say,” and “A--That’s Freedom” (actually his brother Hank’s tune, but Thad’s arrangement).

Thad’s music also offers a marvelous yin-yang of rhythmic groove with harmonic intensity. I’ve always had the impression that he, like Ellington and Strayhorn, knew that as long as you get people to move their feet (and who knows what else), they’ll love those minor ninths!

Specifically, “Thad” employs one of his favorite forms, the 16-bar blues, in one of his favorite keys, Ab. But as an added wrinkle, I wrote the tune half in Ab and half in A, and added an 8-measure tag.

The changes are:

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||: Ab7 | Db7 | Ab7 | Ebm7-Ab7 | D7 | D7 | A7-Ab7 | G7-Gb7 | Fmaj7#5 |  
E7sus4-E7 | Eb7#9-A7 | Ab7sus4-D7 | Db7sus4-G9 | Gb7sus4-C7 | Bm7-E7 |  
Bbm7-Eb7 :|| Fmaj7 | Gb7 | Gmaj7 | Ab7-Bb7 | Bmaj7#5 | C7sus4-Dbmaj7 |  
Gb7sus4 | Gb7#11 ||
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The melody is full of the large intervals (especially the minor ninth) and dissonant chord degrees that Thad favored (ex. 1). Once it’s been stated, the form is that of a typical big-band arrangement. There is a large sprinkling of quotes from Thad’s music throughout, including a 32-bar “cut and paste” section of quotes shoehorned into the form of the tune. In his liner notes Bill Kirchner outlines the sources used in this section.

3) *In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning*

The re-harmonization of this lovely tune came about, literally, “in the wee small hours of the morning,” in my hotel room after a gig one night in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It’s the result of a game I played in which I tried to keep the melody intact, but lower the roots a whole step (ex. 2). The muted trumpets echo the tune’s verse at the very end. This is one of several pieces on this album which arose from the sound of the major soloist (here it’s Dick Oatts).

4) *Lickety Split*

This piece is the result of a “What if?” proposition. What if the baritone saxophone player in James Brown’s band started to o.d. on Woody Shaw, Sun Ra, and Witold Lutoslawski? And one night he lost it and went completely over the line?

The first six measures lay out a twelve-tone row (ex. 3) which returns later in the piece. The “tune” has an angular (W. Shaw-like) melody over a rhythm groove based loosely on “I’ve Got the Feeling”

(James Brown). The piece then settles into being an up-tempo blowing vehicle for Gary Smulyan's baritone sax. But after a while the twelve-tone row returns, this time as a broken funk vamp. Each statement of the vamp is answered by the band with a texture I call "swinging pointillism." It, too, is derived from serial technique. The vamp finally gives way to a pointillistic explosion. The row has taken over--until it finally collapses from rhythmic exhaustion. Finally the baritone sax re-emerges, in the way that the Apollo capsules used to re-emerge from radio silence after coming around the dark side of the moon, much to mission control's relief. He provides us with a final lyrical statement, a reworking of one of the vamps from earlier in the piece.

5) *Absolution*

This is another instance in which the sound of the major soloist (Rich Perry this time) served as the impetus for the piece.

The opening section is a dialogue between two melodic groups. They're working out a couple of different pitch groups (ex. 4), and a couple of different rhythmic cells. This occurs over a 3-measure vamp (ex. 5). They finally conclude with the ascending "agreement" in 3/4. Using an octave triplet figure they then eject Rich from their number, leaving him to solo and work out his inner voice over a 2-measure isorhythmic vamp in E minor (ex. 6). It's a five-attack rhythmic pattern with a 6-pitch cycle. So it keeps spilling over itself (ex. 6a).

The ensemble offers a brief "prayer" (chorale), then there ensues a litany in which all the wind players offer a series of brief solo statements, each one answered by the full band. The band builds to a climax, then Rich emerges for a final cathartic solo statement. The ensemble re-states the ascending 3/4 phrase, and extends it to become a final statement of absolution.

6) *Sticks*

This piece was designed to be a mini-concerto for Ed Neumeister. I'd long enjoyed his use of the trumpet straight-mute/plunger set-up (à la "Tricky Sam" Nanton and Quentin Jackson), and wanted to give him a darker, more dissonant harmonic palette to work with. One of the challenges of writing this piece was that the mute setup would limit the dynamic level of the piece, resulting in a quiet intensity.

The form develops like this:

- (Bass/piano intro)
- Tbn theme | Ens develop theme | Tbn. solo 1 | Ens. develop theme further | Tbn, solo 2 | Reed "bridge"---Ens. develop theme even further
- Tbn. main solo | add background
- Ens. develop counterpoint--Build to climax
- Tbn. cadenza
- Reed "bridge" | Final melodic statement | Ens. figure

The theme is based on the free development, expansion and transposition of a melodic cell (see ex. 7).

The mallets on tom-toms in the beginning add to the mystery of the piece. We found it important to tune the toms to an F minor triad; otherwise the tonal center of the bass line would be obscured.

7) *Reflection*

In his opening solo, Billy Drewes freely embellishes a written line, based on a series of expanding and contracting intervals (see ex. 8). This interval series returns at the very end, in the “blips-and-blaps” between the piano and alto.

The “head” is played by a combination of all four flügelhorns, flutes, clarinet, and alto sax in a tight voicing (see ex. 9). It gradually builds into Billy’s solo over a vamp reminiscent of John Coltrane’s “Equinox.” The band builds behind him, nearly overpowering him. But, as the ensemble fades away, Billy is still standing. The return of the interval series closes the circle, and the piece ends.

8) *Mel*

Every guy should have a Jewish uncle. In my case it was Mel Lewis. I conceived this piece around a number of facets of Mel’s playing:

- World’s most creative use of quarter-notes!
- Brushes
- Burning behind a strong tenor solo
- Setting up figures in a shout chorus with elegantly simple fills
- The be-bop phrase he played at the end of each set (ex. 10)

The last piece Mel ever played with his band was a performance of Thad Jones’s “To You” at the International Association of Jazz Educators convention in New Orleans in January, 1990. “Mel” begins with a quote from the end of Thad’s piece, and allows the spirit of Mel to return to the bandstand with a vengeance.

The head is a duo between drums and all the horns. This is probably the only tune I’ve ever written in which the entire harmonic progression was composed first, the melody coming later. It was designed as a “be-bop” progression which would move through a number of different keys:

Bb--D--Gb--A || Db7sus4--Gb7sus4 || Ab--C

After Ralph Lalama’s tenor solo, there’s a drum solo. After an open section the solo enters an improvised call-and-response area. The band listens to John Riley’s 4- or 2-bar phrases, and throw them back at him. The piece moves into a tutti, the likes of which Mel used to relish playing. Mel’s signature phrase closes the piece, and thereby the album.

I can get a little maudlin when I think about this album. I still remember the first time, as a high school student, I heard Thad and Mel on the radio in Chicago on WAAF radio; it was Holmes “Daddy-O” Daylie’s show, “Daddy-O’s Jazz Patio” (“for those who live it, those who love it, and those who make a living of it”). I was knocked out, but I had no inkling that some day I would play with the band. Even more remote was the thought that I would write an album for the band 30-plus years afterwards. Yet now I see that with that first hearing a big fire, a bonfire, had been lit in me. Thanks, Daddy-O! Thanks Fr. George Wiskirchen, John Garvey, Jim Knapp, Morgan Powell, Thad Jones, Mel Lewis, and Bob Brookmeyer. Ever onward and upward!

—Jim McNeely

Born in Chicago in 1949, **Jim McNeely** moved to New York City in 1975. Since then he has become part of the international jazz scene. He received his first critical acclaim as pianist with the groups of trumpeters Ted Curson and Chet Baker. In 1978 he joined the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis

Jazz Orchestra. He spent six years as a featured soloist with that band and its successor, Mel Lewis and the Jazz Orchestra (now the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra). 1981 saw the beginning of McNeely's four-year tenure as pianist/composer with the Stan Getz Quartet. From 1990 until 1995 he held the piano chair in the Phil Woods Quintet. At the present time (1997), he leads his own trio, and appears as soloist at concerts and festivals in places as varied as Finland, Austria, and Cleveland. McNeely's reputation as an original composer/arranger for large jazz bands continues to grow. His most recent work includes projects with the Carnegie Hall Jazz Band, the West German Radio (W.D.R.) Big Band, and the Stockholm Jazz Orchestra. In January of 1996 he rejoined the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra as pianist and composer-in-residence. McNeely has appeared as a sideman on numerous recordings led by artists such as Thad Jones, Mel Lewis, Stan Getz, Bob Brookmeyer, David Liebman, Art Farmer, Robert Watson, and Phil Woods. He currently has eight albums under his own name, the latest a solo recording, *Jim McNeely at Maybeck*. Since 1981 he has been part of the jazz faculty at New York University, where he is currently Adjunct Resident Artist in Jazz Studies. He has appeared at numerous college jazz festivals as a performer and clinician, and has been involved regularly with summer workshops such as the Stanford Jazz Workshop and Jamey Aebersold's Summer Jazz Clinics. He has also done teaching residencies at institutions in the U.S., Canada, Spain, Sweden, Finland, Germany, and Australia. In the Fall of 1991 he became a co-director of the BMI Jazz Composer's Workshop.

The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra is the current title for a band that began life as the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Orchestra in 1966 and has performed continuously ever since. Cornetist-composer-arranger Thad Jones and drummer Mel Lewis founded the band in New York. Having settled there after leaving their respective touring jobs with Basie and Kenton, Thad and Mel along with many of their colleagues needed an outlet for their creative energies and relief from the tedium of the studio work. With a handful of arrangements they approached legendary club owner Max Gordon and were booked at the Village Vanguard for three Mondays one February. Critical acclaim, awards, and international success followed but, in 1979, tired of frequent traveling and the economic uncertainty that even great jazz musicians endure in America, Thad left the band to accept leadership of the Danish Radio Orchestra in Copenhagen.

Mel decided to continue the band, now billed as Mel Lewis and the Jazz Orchestra, and enlisted the talents of his old friend and former band member Bob Brookmeyer who, miraculously, was just returning to active playing and composing in New York. The band not only survived but with Brookmeyer's writing continued the innovation and influence that Thad and Mel had begun. Bob moved on to other projects and ultimately also settled in Europe, the new material coming from within the band now. In 1990 the band would endure a terrible blow when Mel Lewis died after a five-year battle with cancer. For the members, all of whom had been there for five years and several for more than ten, losing Mel was a deep family tragedy, for great bands invariably become families. They are also teams--and in this spirit decided to continue the band as a cooperative effort. (When asked who was "fronting" the band, one of the veterans was heard snapping "the music.")

So three weeks have become 28 years, and another name change, to the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra. Several of the key members played with Thad, so the original precepts of sound and swinging are proudly held and displayed, while the other original precepts of creativity and experimentation are nurtured and encouraged. The Village Vanguard is still a great place to be on a Monday night, no matter which side of the bandstand you're on.

The ensemble lineage includes: Jerome Richardson, Jerry Dodgian, Bob Brookmeyer, Jimmy Knepper, Billy Cambell, Snooky Young, Ted Nash, Marvin Stamm, John Faddis, Al Porcino, Dave Taylor, Cliff Heather, Pepper Adams, Joe Farrell, Eddie Daniels, Joe Henderson, Billy Harper, Frank Foster, Joe Lovano, Larry Schneider, Hank Jones, Roland Hanna, George Mraz, Walter Norris, Harold Danko, Kenny Werner, Richard Davis, Ray Drummand, Bennie Powell, Steve Coleman, Rufus Reid, Richie Kamuca, Mark Johnson, Howard Johnson.

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The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra
Established February 1966 by Thad Jones and Mel Lewis

Sixteen as One Music Inc.

A not-for-profit 501 (C) (3), created by the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra to promote the growth and development of jazz music.

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LICKETY SPLIT 80534-2
MUSIC OF JIM MCNEELY (b. 1949)
THE VANGUARD JAZZ ORCHESTRA

1 **Extra Credit** (Jim McNeely; publ. Wu Wei Music, BMI) 8:53

Solos: Rich Perry, tenor saxophone; Ed Neumeister, trombone; Jim McNeely, piano; Scott Wendholt, trumpet

2 **Thad** (Jim McNeely; publ. Wu Wei Music, BMI) 12:02

Solos: Jim McNeely, piano; John Mosca, trombone; Scott Wendholt, trumpet

3 **In The Wee Small Hours of the Morning** (David Mann, Bob Hilliard; publ. Better Half Music Co. and Rytvoc, Inc., ASCAP) 7:41

Solo: Dick Oatts, alto saxophone

4 **Lickety Split** (Jim McNeely; publ. Wu Wei Music, BMI) 7:51

Solo: Gary Smulyan, baritone saxophone

5 **Absolution** (Jim McNeely; publ. Wu Wei Music, BMI) 8:17

Solo: Rich Perry, tenor saxophone

Short solo order: Dick Oatts, John Mosca, Ralph LaLama, Scott Wendholt, Gary Smulyan, Joe Mosello, John Mosca, Billy Drewes, Glenn Drewes, Douglas Purviance, Earl Gardner, Ralph LaLama, John Mosca, Ed Neumeister, Dick Oatts, Scott Wendholt, Gary Smulyan

6 **Sticks** (Jim McNeely; publ. Wu Wei Music, BMI) 7:37

Solo: Ed Neumeister, trombone

7 **Reflection** (Jim McNeely; publ. Wu Wei Music, BMI) 8:37

Solo: Billy Drewes, alto saxophone

8 **Mel** (Jim McNeely; publ. Wu Wei Music, BMI) 8:46

Solos: Ralph LaLama, tenor saxophone; Dennis Irwin, bass; John Riley, drums

All compositions arranged by Jim McNeely

THE VANGUARD JAZZ ORCHESTRA

Trumpets: Earl Gardner (Lead), Joe Mosello, Glenn Drewes, Scott Wendholt **Trombones:** John Mosca (Lead), Ed Neumeister, Douglas Purviance, Earl McIntyre **Reeds:** Dick Oatts, (Lead) alto and soprano saxophones, flute; Billy Drewes, alto and soprano saxophones, flute; Rich Perry, tenor saxophone, clarinet, flute; Ralph LaLama, tenor saxophone, clarinet, flute; Gary Smulyan, baritone saxophone, bass clarinet **Rhythm section:** Jim McNeely, piano; John Riley, drums; Dennis Irwin, bass

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