

At This Point. Alex Dean Quintet, featuring Lorne Lofsky. Toronto, Ont.: Cornerstone Records, CRST CD 134, 2010. 1 compact disc (52:28). Performers: Alex Dean, tenor saxophone; Brian Dickinson, piano, Fender Rhodes; Kieran Overs, bass; Ted Warren, drums; Lorne Lofsky, guitar (tracks 1, 2, 7). All compositions by Alex Dean. Contents: *Rick and Ed* (7:05) – *Note to Self* (6:47) – *At This Point* (8:10) – *Nice Guys* (8:12) – Mr. B.C. (7:51) – *Pat and Pat* (5:53) – *Something about Farming* (8:14). \$20.00

For those who are unfamiliar with Alex Dean, he has been a long-standing fixture in the Canadian jazz scene as both a performer and educator. Aside from playing in his own groups, he was a member of Rob McConnell's Boss Brass and made up one-third of the Toronto jazz trio, D.E.W. (Alex Dean, Barry Elmes, Steve Wallace). In addition to being a first-call woodwind player, Dean holds appointments with the University of Toronto and Humber College in their jazz programs, and is in high demand as an adjudicator at regional and national music festivals in Canada.

At This Point is Dean's first album under his own name in a number of years and it begins with a beautifully understated and contemplative tune called "Rick and Ed." This track demonstrates a complete lack of pretension, giving instead a glimpse into the interrelationships of this group. We are given leave to eavesdrop while the players languidly explore this standard thirty-two bar song form. Dean, Lofsky, and Overs all take solos which are short and to the point. The song showcases the ease and comfort with which these musicians converse with each other, and serves to get the listener excited for what is to come.

A more up-tempo offering comes in the form of "Note to Self," with Dean and Lofsky taking up the melody in unison over a straight-eighth groove. Dean takes the first solo and we hear that his sound is firmly rooted in the modern tradition with its bright tone and immaculate articulation. On this song he takes an intervallic approach to the improvisation, jumping from register to register on his tenor with impressive control and harmonic ingenuity. Next comes Lofsky, opening with a widely intervallic statement that lends continuity between the soloists. We finally hear Brian Dickinson with a brief solo on the Rhodes where he acquits himself well. One of the gems of this track is Ted Warren. Not only does he take a solo that is coherent and inventive, his playing all the way through lifts the music with his use of the drum set's palate of sounds, including altering the contact point of the sticks on the cymbals to create a different texture and using unorthodox parts of the drum set such as the cymbal stands. Warren is without question one of Canada's most interesting jazz musicians.

One of the trends in modern tenor sax albums is to have a solo introduction to a song. Contemporary examples of this can be heard in the later part of Michael Brecker's discography as well as the albums of Chris Potter. "At This Point" opens with an aggressive solo by Dean that again displays his intervallic approach to improvisation. This solo is like listening to a master class of modern jazz saxophone playing, with its

jumps into the altissimo register and its use of split notes and multiphonics. All of this leads into the song itself, which is a fairly simple theme set against a straight-eighth feel, with the solos stretching in and out of a swing feel. This is a perfect vehicle for the solos starting with Dickinson, this time on piano. He gets a chance to stretch out more on this tune and he takes advantage with a solo that is meatier than his previous outings. It demonstrates why he is one of Toronto's most in-demand sidemen, with a blend of stunning lines and block chord passages used to great effect here.

"Nice Guys" is a wonderfully constructed song that, instead of a melody with an accompanying backdrop, resembles more a full arrangement for quartet. It begins with a piano ostinato that is clearly an homage to Herbie Hancock's "Maiden Voyage." The simple melody is set off by rhythmic accents in the piano, bass and drums that outline the 7/4 (grouped as 4+3) time signature in the A sections. The melody presents itself as an A-A-B-A² where A² is a slightly altered version of A. The harmony played in the solos is A-A-B-A which is a common practice in jazz used to simplify the form of the song for soloing on. I give this detail to emphasize the fact that this album is not a string of puerile platforms for improvisation. Dean demonstrates a real knack for composition and has constructed some thoughtful, sublime vignettes. Warren takes another inventive solo after Dean and Dickinson. The cymbal timbres are especially beautiful and it is also worth noting how seamlessly the rhythm section navigates the 7/4 time signature.

Both "Mr. B.C." and "Pat and Pat" provide more room for the core quartet to shine, but when we get to "Something about Farming" the group shifts gears a bit. It starts out in a Latin feel with the tenor and guitar stating the melody in unison again as we heard in Lofsky's other appearances on this album. Dean takes the first solo and right away there is a departure stylistically. At the beginning of his solo the phrases are more linear, which is not to say less interesting, and he gets out of the way rather quickly. Dickinson enters next with another short solo and then leaves to make room for Lofsky. Admittedly, I had not heard much of his playing before this album, but the first thing that struck me was that gorgeous sound. It has a warmth and lushness that nicely contrasts with the crisp articulation and phrasing.

All in all, this album does a wonderful job of providing a snapshot of what Dean describes as a happy and productive period of his life. Supported by great sidemen, Dean is free to stretch out and have some fun playing his own music. Between the superb solos and appealing arrangements, this album is an excellent example of the kind of jazz being played in the clubs of this country. Any music library looking to bolster its collection of Canadian jazz should purchase *At This Point*. Not only is it a beautiful album, but from a pedagogical standpoint it also serves up some solos that jazz students can transcribe for further examination and study. I would think that it is of particular interest to saxophonists, pianists and guitarists.

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