

**Still Rollin'.** Mike Murley Septet: Mike Murley, tenor saxophone; Tara Davidson, soprano & alto saxophones; Kevin Turcotte, trumpet; Terry Promane, trombone; David Braid, piano; Jim Vivian, bass; Ted Warren, drums. Toronto: Cornerstone Records CRST CD 135, 2010. 1 compact disc (65:06). Contents: *Still rollin'* (6:32) – *Minas mist* (9:12) – *Joanie's steps* (9:47) – *Johnny has gone for a soldier* (7:22) – *Tide line* (9:14) – *Sonny's way* (6:49) – *Cascade* (6:37) – *Tunnel* (1:57) – *Rundle* (6:57). \$20.00.

Mike Murley has been a fixture on the Toronto jazz scene since the early 1980s, having contributed to groups such as the Shuffle Demons, Time Warp, Boss Brass, Metalwood and, more recently, DMBQ and his own groups. Aside from performing, Murley is also an active educator and, since 2005, he has been an area coordinator of the jazz program at York University. *Still Rollin'* features a number of Murley's compositions arranged for a septet of some of Toronto's finest jazz musicians.

The first song is the title track and it begins with bass/piano ostinato over a straight-eighth beat. The melody is largely played in unison, occasionally breaking into harmony. Murley takes the first solo and his distinctive tone makes an immediate impression. He has a unique voice on the tenor and, although he is harmonically creative, it's his melodic sensibility that is his greatest strength. He uses long phrases and colours the longer notes with inflections and enharmonic doubling (i.e., the practice of playing one note using different fingerings to produce different timbres) in a way that lends a lot of individuality to his sound. After the saxophone solo, Terry Promane takes a trombone solo and then the rhythm section vamps for a few bars, with Ted Warren making a succinct percussion statement before the band heads back to the melody.

The album continues with a track called "Minas Mist," which starts with a tenor solo. Murley evokes a pensive mood by playing a series of harmonics to create a kind of nebulous atmosphere. This all sets up the melody as the rhythm section sneaks in followed by a melody statement with the horns backing up Murley. Jim Vivian takes the first solo and the bass is the perfect choice for soloist in this song. His intonation and articulation on the acoustic bass is spot-on. Some nice background figures by the horns complement the solos. Murley follows with a plaintive solo that continues his theme in the opening with the use of a lot of colours and sounds until he opens up the altissimo register to conclude the solo.

"Joanie's Steps" is a wordplay since the song is based on the harmony of John Coltrane's *Giant Steps*, and here we get the first piece of the album that feels like a septet is playing. The previous songs have used all seven voices, but mostly they are heard in unison or backing up a soloist. This time, the melody is stated in harmony by all, which creates the feeling of a small big band. Tara Davidson's solo is prefaced by a short duet by Davidson and Murley that is reminiscent of Lee Konitz and Warne Marsh. Davidson takes her solo and navigates the chords and metric changes with apparent ease. It's an inventive solo that is calm, measured, and tightly controlled. It's almost compositional in nature, but it does not lack for personality. Davidson utilizes the whole horn and demonstrates why she is an up and coming jazz artist on the Toronto scene. Murley comes in again at the end of her solo to bookend this section with another duet. The piano player, David Braid, enters with a cerebral solo that combines flowing lines with staccato chord shots and navigates the double time section with ease. Finally, Kevin Turcotte takes a solo with his usual fiery approach. It's a refreshing contrast to the previous solos which were much more restrained.

Following “Joanie’s Steps” is “Johnny Has Gone for a Soldier” which, as Murley puts it in the liner notes, “[is a] traditional song...which evolved from the Celtic piece entitled Shule Agra.” He seems to have a strong emotional connection to this piece because his solo is quite touching. With the help of Warren and Vivian, Murley’s solo builds to a gushing crescendo that is one of the highlights of the album. Braid’s beautiful, delicate solo follows, supported by a chorale-like statement of the melody by the horn section.

“Tide Line” which, like “Joanie’s Steps,” feels more like a piece for septet. The wonderfully arranged melody by Murley shows off the palette of colours he’s working with here. While other tracks often feel like a quintet is playing, this song is a much more successful in that it fully explores the dynamics of the septet. Davidson’s solo on this track is worth mentioning. Rhythmically, the solo shines as she demonstrates a real knack for playing over the bar line.

“Sonny’s Way” is Murley’s homage to Sonny Rollins and, as such, it starts off with a swaggering statement of the melody on solo tenor. This is repeated by the whole band, which then leads to mini solos for each of the players. The band seems to enjoy the tune, which contains a few “Sonnyisms,” with everyone just digging in and swinging for the first time on the album. Murley solos first and he continues the song’s swagger, obviously having a great time until he hands it off to Promane who turns in an exceptional performance. This is a strong arrangement which helps to offset some of the other less successful ones.

The last three tracks—“Cascade,” “Tunnel” and “Rundle”—comprise a suite dedicated to three mountains in Banff, Alberta. “Cascade” is just that: a wash of sounds cascading against each other. Vivian begins by bowing the melody with support from Warren and Braid before the horns come in with a restatement of that melody. There is no strict meter here as the song is navigated using cues until the piano solo where they go in and out of strict time. Rather than a septet, this piece again feels like something for a standard jazz quartet or quintet with a couple of extra voices thrown in.

“Tunnel” is very short solo bass piece credited to Jim Vivian. It leads into the bass intro for “Rundle,” the last piece on the album, which again I have to say just feels underdeveloped as a piece for septet. The horns are used in a background figure for the melody, which is played by a soloist, and then the figure is repeated behind the solos.

The playing on this album is of the highest quality. I want to make that clear. This group is comprised of some of the best jazz musicians in the country and they all shine. As an album for septet, however, it is not convincing. As I have pointed out above, there are several songs that feel like they were developed for seven voices. But no one would have been the wiser had the rest of the album appeared on Murley’s next quartet or quintet outing. Compared to some of the other “little big bands” out there, such as Joe Lovano’s nonet, the arrangements of many of the songs on this album fall flat. That said, the album is still worth purchasing since it provides valuable original source material for solo transcriptions by jazz students.

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