

**My Old Hat.** Del Dako. Toronto, ON: Dako Music, [2011]. 1 compact disc (48:15). Performers: Del Dako, alto and baritone saxophones; David Restivo, piano (tracks 1-6); Dick Felix, bass (tracks 1-6); Mike McClelland, drums (tracks 1-6); Bernie Senensky, piano (track 7); Duncan Hopkins, bass (track 7); Greg Pilo, drums (track 7). Contents: *Green Dolphin Street* (4:50) – *Invitation* (10:09) – *Windows* (8:29) – *Laura* (6:51) – *Gordie’s Tune* (8:26) – *Primitivo* (2:09) – *I’ll Remember April* (8:21). \$14.99

**My New Hat.** Del Dako. Toronto, ON: Dako Music, [2010]. 1 compact disc (50:41). Performers: Del Dako, vibraphone; Jeff Halischuk, drums; Reg Schwager, guitar (1, 4); Bernie Senensky, piano (1), organ (1); Duncan Hopkins, bass (1, 4); Alex Dean, tenor saxophone (3, 5, 6, 7), bass clarinet (3, 5, 8); Nathan Hiltz, guitar (2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8); Tyler Emond, bass (2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8), electric bass (8). Contents: *So What* (6:53) – *Beethoven’s 7th* (6:56) – *Big Alice* (9:16) – *Old Folks* (5:11) – *Invitation* (6:36) – *Chelsea Bridge* (6:50) – *Wave* (6:16) – *Big Alice Remix* (2:43). \$14.99

Del Dako is a veteran of the Toronto jazz scene, having performed and recorded in Toronto for several decades, recording four albums, completing two cross-Canada tours, and winning three Jazz Report Awards for best baritone saxophonist of the year. His career as a saxophonist came to an abrupt halt in 2001 when he broke his neck while mountain biking. Although initially declared quadriplegic, he miraculously recovered the ability to use his limbs. Sadly, his fine motor skills did not recover completely, which meant that playing saxophone was no longer an option. Dako then taught himself to play the vibraphone, and began playing live shows again in Toronto in 2007.

Listened to together, these two albums represent the two phases of his musical career. The first, *My Old Hat*, was recorded in 1995, and features Dako on alto and baritone saxophones, alongside Toronto musicians Dave Restivo on piano, Mike McClelland on drums, and Dick Felix on bass.<sup>1</sup> At this time, Dako already had two Jazz Report Awards (1993, 1994) and a cross-country tour under his belt.<sup>2</sup> The second album, *My New Hat*, is Dako’s debut on vibes. Recorded in 2007-8, it features Jeff Halischuk on drums for all tracks, while others play on various tracks: Alex Dean on saxophone, Reg Schwager and Nathan Hiltz on guitar, Duncan Hopkins and Tyler Emond on bass, and Bernie Senensky on piano.

Both albums are comprised mainly of arrangements of jazz standards. “Invitation” is recorded on both albums, and while both versions feature the use of the “So What” bass ostinato over the A section, the songs have very different feels. *My Old Hat* includes two original compositions by Dako, “Gordie’s Tune” and “Primitivo.” *My New Hat* offers up two versions of “Big Alice,” a tune that, according to the liner notes, Dako first heard Charles Mingus play in Toronto in the seventies. This album also includes a clever arrangement Dako wrote of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony.

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<sup>1</sup> The final track of this album, recorded live at the Montreal Bistro in 1998, features Bernie Senensky on piano, Duncan Hopkins on bass and Greg Pilo on drums.

<sup>2</sup> He would complete a second tour and win another Jazz Report award in 1999, and record another album before his accident.

One thing that is quite clear after listening to both of these albums: Dako's ability to make both the saxophone and vibes *sing* demonstrates a deep understanding of their histories and conventions. As a result, his playing on both albums sounds very different. On *My Old Hat*, we hear a musician who plays in an effortless bop style on alto and bari sax. We hear driving lines over the faster pieces, rhythmic variations and development on the Latin tunes, and a great big buildup and release in his ballads. We hear a big and brassy baritone sound contrasted with his alto, which has a brightness to it that makes it full and light. On *My New Hat*, we hear a musician with an ear for texture and colour on the vibes. His lines are thoughtful and make excellent use of space, but are in no way timid. What is more, he deftly incorporates the rhythmic and melodic material from both the head and the rhythm section. When comping behind a soloist, his voicings are lush and perfectly complementary.

The timbre of both albums is also different, mainly because of the fact that both albums feature different instrumentations – not to mention different musicians. Whereas *My Old Hat* features a standard jazz quartet instrumentation of saxophone, piano, drums and bass, *My New Hat* also includes the vibraphone, guitar, and bass clarinet.

What connects these two recordings is Dako's creativity, wit, and tenacity. The arrangements are interesting, ranging from a simple bassline substitution, which is the case for "Invitation," or a small ensemble rendering of a Beethoven masterpiece. These albums are also connected, in that they both feature groups that play very well together in terms of their ensemble playing and their interactivity while soloing and comping. This manifests most clearly on *My Old Hat* through the way that the group rises and falls in intensity with each solo as though a single organism. This is clearly a group that is used to – and enjoys – playing together. The same can be said of the group on *My New Hat*. There is a strong sense of collectivity on these tracks as the musicians glide seamlessly through arranged and improvised sections, sometimes eschewing the form of the tune altogether.

These albums represent both an end and beginning in Dako's musical journey. More importantly, this recording marks his promising and sophisticated debut as a vibraphonist. Overall, the playing on these albums is of high calibre. In all instances, the musicians on these recordings not only demonstrate their abilities as soloists, but also as highly interactive and responsive ensemble members. This makes these recordings useful as examples for budding improvisers looking to improve their ensemble playing, as well as material for them to transcribe in order to work on their solos. I am happy to recommend these albums, and look forward to the next installment of Del Dako's new hat.

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