

***Test of Time***. Performers: Mike Murley, tenor saxophone; Ed Bickert, guitar; Steve Wallace, bass. Toronto: Cornerstone Records, 2012. 1 compact disc (58:33). Contents: Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered (6:50) – I Should Care (6:34) – Test of Time (5:06) – I Wish I Knew (6:50) – You for Me (4:46) – Stanstill (5:52) – East of the Sun (6:50) – You are Too Beautiful (5:47) – Golden Earrings (9:47).

*Test of Time* is the result of a recently rediscovered recording session conducted in January 1999. The album presents previously unreleased material from three of Canada's finest jazz musicians: Mike Murley, Steve Wallace, and Ed Bickert. All three have had celebrated careers playing in myriad groups principally in Toronto but also touring extensively. Tenor saxophonist Murley is esteemed for his versatility and his melodic improvisational style. Wallace's bass playing displays an impressive mix of agility and groove. Especially noteworthy, however, is the participation of guitarist Bickert, who retired from performing in 2001. His bebop-influenced style exhibits a thoughtful grace that made him a much-sought-after artist internationally.

The selections, a mix of standards with two originals by Murley ("Test of Time" and "Stanstill"), were recorded between live recording sessions for the trio's other album, *Top of the Senator*. Each song on this new album demonstrates the deep musical connection among the players. The tracks flow flawlessly, sounding as an organic whole. Murley and Bickert also appear to be of one mind when they solo collectively, finishing each other's musical sentences. This is most clearly heard in the introductions to the first two songs, "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" and "I Should Care." Wallace's impeccable sense of time anchors the groove, especially in the album's title track, an up-tempo blues where the walking lines swing hard.

The tone of the recording shifts with the modal intro by Bickert and Wallace to "I Wish I Knew." With a half-time bass line and sustained chordal accompaniment on guitar, Murley's rendition of the head seems to float overtop. The solos are played at a medium swing tempo, grounded once again by a walking bass line, creating a light, easy feel. "You for Me" is a medium up-tempo track where Murley's bop lines flow freely over the brightly paced tempo of Bickert and Wallace. Bickert also takes a solo on this tune, bouncing through the changes with agility. "Stanstill" shifts the mood once more. Bickert and Wallace set the tone with a modal feel. Wallace's bass lines hint of a Latin feel which, combined with the long lines of Murley's solo and Bickert's sustained comping, craft a bossa nova mood. Murley's solo is melodic and thoughtful, contrasting long, lavish notes with double-time lines. A subdued yet intense feel is present in Wallace's solo.

“East of the Sun” opens with a lively tenor intro from which bass and guitar hop in effortlessly. Bickert takes the first solo and, after a break, another delicious bop solo. Murley and Wallace follow up with their respective solos and continue the bop theme. Solos are traded in the last chorus before the head, and again it is as if the players are finishing each other’s phrases.

A rubato guitar intro heralds “You are Too Beautiful.” This ballad features solos on tenor and bass. Murley’s keen melodic sense shines in his solo, infusing the lines with just the right balance of bluesy long notes, space, and complexity. Wallace’s solo highlights his lyrical ability as an improviser. “Golden Earrings,” a brooding medium-tempo song with a bluesy feel, is the final track on this recording. The solos are imbued with a deep blues feel that invoke the haunted mood of the original.

*Test of Time* has withstood exactly that. Almost fifteen years later, the tunes on this album stand out as exemplars of straight ahead jazz. Murley, Bickert and Wallace ease seamlessly between grooves and sections of songs, with each player possessing a mastery of his instrument. Unquestionably, the recording deserved its nomination for the 2013 Juno Award for Traditional Jazz Album. I recommend it with pleasure.

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