

[Review Pete Robbins]

Let's get this out of the way first: "Do The Hate Laugh Shimmy" is a title that the artist took from an e.e. cummings poem. Don't ask me what it means (even the artist is not entirely sure), but it sounds stylin' all the same.

The stylin' music contained in Do The Hate Laugh Shimmy is easier to pin down, but only slightly so. That's probably just fine with Pete Robbins, too.

The alto saxophonist Robbins seems to have carved out a niche bringing a rock intensity of his pre-jazz days to the intricacies of his current passion for the avant garde and bop. The result is music that's varied, inventive, and progressive. The best part about it is that each time out, Robbins brings a different mode of attack.

Even more impressively, Robbins' compositions each packs numerous ideas in the space of about six minutes or less. He gets it done mainly by forgoing extended solos, but the scores give his players plenty of room to breathe and create.

I've read the criticism about Robbins that his melodies are not that memorable, that his songs don't leave a clear impression. While his prior Waits And Measures was plenty respectable, there's a noticeable leap from that 2005 release to this one in Robbins' ability to work some hooks into his complex composing style.

That's apparent right from lead track "Fairmont," which has a very lyrical head to go with tense, sometimes dissonant solos. Meanwhile, the rhythm section of Craig Taborn (Rhodes), Thomas Morgan (acoustic bass) and Dan Weiss (drums) are rumbling beneath Robbins' and Sam Sadigurskys' (tenor sax) solos, sometimes slipping in odd time signatures. The entire song starts ambiently with Ben Monder's desolate guitar and builds up to maximum intensity, before fading away softly again on Taborn's sparsely played electric piano. "Fairmount" is just an example of how Robbins devises not one but several schemes at once within each song.

"The Hate Laugh Shimmy" starts and ends with a real cerebral statement made by the leader and guitarist Ryan Blotnick, made even more complex by Sadigursky simultaneously playing a different but equally complicated statement. Weiss' drum solo in the middle of the song appeals at the gut level, though.

"Anyway, And" is the only composition on here that reminds me of any other artist; Taborn's Fender Rhodes ruminations over Thomas Morgan's stand-up bass groove brings my mind back to Joe Zawinul and Dave Holland laying down a dark vibe for Miles in early 1969.

"Mid-September And The Five Week After" makes use of effects, loops and guitar to create spooky textures where the actual song itself doesn't enter until about a third of the way through. Here, soloing is

dispensed in favor of an eerie, compelling groove.

The biggest surprise is saved for last. "Stiff Upper Lip" is hard-driving rock paced by Gamble's guitar, but Robbins' sax and Jesse Nueman's trumpet on a wah-wah pedal double up for a tricky bop line.

The remainder of the ten tracks has its share of surprises and unique nuances, too. I might listen to this record a hundred times and still pick up a tactic or change that I didn't detect before.

The music of Pete Robbins is dense, involved, and takes time to wrap your ears around. For those patient enough to get to the heart of these tunes, the rewards are great. Robbins' tangled tunes challenges his players to approach their playing outside of normal convention, and when they respond to the challenge as these have done on Do The Hate Laugh Shimmy, it's music that defies description but is highly creative and occasionally breathtaking.

Robbins' nice little niche within jazz is one that anyone with an open mind toward music will eagerly lap up. Even if it's impossible to put a label on that niche.

Do The Hate Laugh Shimmy hit the streets this past April 29. Purchase the album at Fresh Sound Records (not available on Amazon.com as of this writing).

By Pico

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