

Christian McBride's New Jawn

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MACK AVENUE 109

★★★★

The word “jawn”—a fresh new phenomenon—is familiar argot to Christian McBride, a Philadelphia native. And when it comes to trail-blazing new, cool jazz concepts in eponymous trios or big bands, the venerable bassist always delivers. Enter his latest jawn—a pianoless quartet, born of a New York scene that sates East Coast soul-seekers and purists alike. Christian

José James Lean On Me

BLUE NOTE 0028674

★★★★½

Ever since José James emerged on the scene, he's struck a shaky alliance with jazz. For every tribute he'll do, for, say, Billie Holiday or John Coltrane, he'd go to great lengths to declare that he doesn't want to be viewed as a jazz singer. For sure, he'd established ties to DJ culture, starting with his sterling debut, *The Dreamer*, and teaming with British impresario Gilles Peterson.

His “neither fish nor fowl” stance hasn't always played to his advantage. On some of his later albums, many of his genre-defying originals lacked the melodic stickiness associated with pop, r&b, hip-hop or jazz. Mainly, it was because of tentative songwriting. Sometimes, though, the best way to become a better songwriter is concentrating on someone else's indelible songbook.

That's what he's done with *Lean On Me*, a superb exploration of Bill Withers' discography. With the help from a few jazz contemporaries, James doesn't stray far from Withers' rugged soul arrangements. In fact, the disc is as much a case study of Withers' artistry as it is a tribute. But what *Lean On Me* lacks in interpretative ingenuity, James compensates for with conviction. He sounds truly engaged with the mate-

McBride's New Jawn faithfully salutes its forebears—Gerry Mulligan, Ornette Coleman and the like—but leave it to this next-gen assimilation of bandleaders to take musical liberties.

No doubt, the Philly flavor is present—tight instrumentation, fast-and-loose percussive subtlety and soul for days. Trumpeter Josh Evans and saxophonist Marcus Strickland rewrite the rulebook, bringing asymmetrical whimsy to the drive of “Walkin' Funny” and “Middle Man,” and moody suspense to the balladeering on “Ernie Washington” and “John Day,” all with impressive linearity. A proper captain, McBride always brings the swing full-circle, setting pace with a particularly pulsating solo on “Seek The Source.” He also finds a confidante in rising drummer Nasheet Waits, who rides the pocket dutifully, even on the shimmering, slow groove of “Kush.”

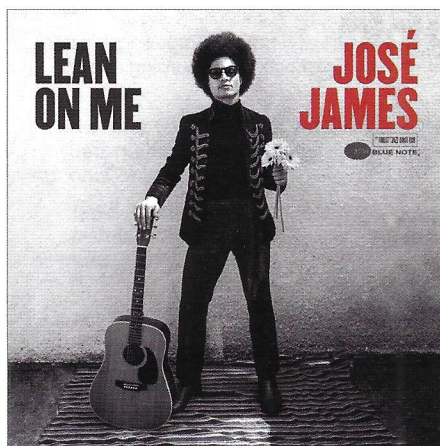
For the faithful, stick around for bonus tracks—“Brother Malcolm” shines lyrical motives and anthemic political perspective on this mix, and live track “Obsequious” finally takes a raucous instrumental plunge previewed on “Ke-Kelli Sketch,” something eagerly craved at the 11th hour.

—Hilary Brown

Christian McBride's New Jawn: Walkin' Funny; Ke-Kelli Sketch; Ballad Of Ernie Washington; The Middle Man; Pier One Import; Kush; Seek The Source; John Day; Sightseeing; Brother Malcolm; Obsequious. (55:75).

Personnel: Christian McBride, bass; Josh Evans, trumpet; Marcus Strickland, tenor saxophone, bass clarinet; Nasheet Waits, drums.

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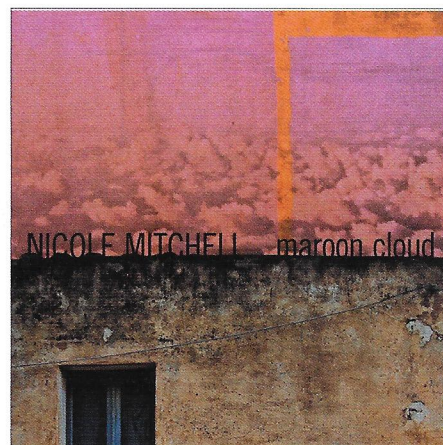
rial throughout, as his whiskey-sour baritone conveys the rainbow of emotions that distinguishes Withers' music. James deftly articulates simmering vim on “Who Is He,” bottomless remorse on “Hope She'll Be Happier” and carefree optimism on “Lovely Day” with poised aplomb, making *Lean On Me* his most assured effort since *The Dreamer*.

—John Murph

Lean On Me: Ain't No Sunshine; Grandma's Hands; Lovely Day; Lean On Me; Kissing My Love; Use Me; Who Is He; Hello Like Before; Just The Two Of Us; Hope She'll Be Happier; The Same Love That Made Me Laugh, Better Off Dead. (54:27)

Personnel: José James, vocals; Pino Palladino, bass; Kris Bowers, keyboards; Nate Smith, drums; Brad Allen Williams, guitar; Lalah Hathaway, vocals (3); Dave McMurray, flute (5); Marcus Strickland, tenor saxophone (9); Takuya Kuroda, trumpet (6).

Ordering info: bluenote.com



Nicole Mitchell Maroon Cloud

FPE 020

★★★★

Flutist Nicole Mitchell attaches at least three meanings to the title of her new disc. One reference is to the dark color itself, another honors the Maroons, Africans who resisted slavery in the Caribbean. And the third sense of the word denotes creativity springing from isolation—or being marooned. These intertwined connotations ultimately enhance a sense of joy that runs through the album's eight interconnected parts.

Mitchell and cellist Tomeka Reid are longtime collaborators, while pianist Aruán Ortiz and vocalist Fay Victor are newer partners. Even without significant time spent as a working unit, their dialogue comes across clearly on this recording of a 2017 Brooklyn performance.

Maroon Cloud primarily conveys Mitchell's depictions of black resistance through her continuing fascination with Afrofuturism, which the group blends with blues on the stellar “Vodou Spacetime Kettle.” The piece begins as Victor's tribute to Bessie Smith, and then Ortiz's accents push her further upward. As the vocalist repeats key lines, Reid and Mitchell's counterpoint builds throughout the piece. That feel also shapes “No One Can Stop Us,” when Mitchell and Reid engage in a sharp call-and-response with Victor, as she repeats the title phrase, turning it into a mantra for perseverance. Classic echoes of Raheem Roland Kirk and Brian Jackson's combination with Gil Scott-Heron run throughout, but this group remains individualistic. That's particularly vivid with Mitchell's own remarkable tone when she careens through its higher register on “Hidden Choice” and then shifts into rougher terrain for “Constellation Symphony.” This narrative ends on notes that sound simultaneously serene and incendiary.

—Aaron Cohen

Maroon Cloud: Warm Dark Realness; Vodou Spacetime Kettle; Otherness; No One Can Stop Us; Endurance; A Sound; Hidden Choice; Constellation Symphony. (65:23)

Personnel: Nicole Mitchell, flute; Fay Victor, vocals; Tomeka Reid, cello; Aruán Ortiz, piano.

Ordering info: fperecs.com