

**REVIEW****DVD Review: *Jazz Shots From The West Coast, Vols. 1-3***

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Tim Gebhart

Frank Zappa once told an audience during a jazz-influenced song, "Jazz is not dead, it just smells funny."

Jazz undoubtedly provides a large variety of aromas that the fan finds enticing or repulsive depending on individual tastes. MVD Entertainment Group seeks to explore one area of taste with its release of *Jazz Shots from the West Coast*, a three-volume series of DVDs of live performances culled from television broadcasts and jazz festivals and club performances. The focus is largely on artists associated with what became known as "West Coast jazz."

Like so much of music, words cannot really describe West Coast jazz for the uninitiated. Yet once you gain even a passing familiarity, you know it when you hear it. It is a derivation of bebop and a direct descendant of cool. Both cool and the West Coast sound (and there always has been a debate whether the West Coast sound is separate from our part of cool) are smoother, more lyrical expressions of bebop. Yet this series shows the broad range of the artists from the West Coast.

For example, Disc 1, released in June, opens with a piece by Art Pepper, a performer well within the West Coast sound. Yet the tune, "D. Section," is much more in the free jazz or post-bop style than the West Coast idiom. Yet the very next performer is Chet Baker, the trumpet player many would view as an epitome of the West Coast school. Like the West Coast sound itself, most of the performances on the three discs, the latter two released this month, are by smaller ensembles. Still, there is also the powerful big band, almost Hollywood sound, of Stan Kenton's mellephonium orchestra. Likewise, there is the more straightforward jazz sound from artists like Wes Montgomery.

Inclusion of the Kenton performances on Disc 3 is indicative of how the series blends icons of the genre with others. Kenton, for example, would not necessarily be considered a member of the West Coast sound. Soloists in his early bands, however, went on to become some of the luminaries in the subgenre. Similarly, saxophonist Lester Young, one of the founders of the cool sound, has two songs on Disc 2. The notes to the DVD specifically note that, although Young may not be part and parcel of the West Coast, he is included "due to

his especially strong influence on the generations of saxophonists from that Coast."

Even in exploring the West Coast sound, the series does not limit itself to the icons. Not only are there a number of clips by such luminaries as the Gerry Mulligan Quartet and the Dave Brubeck Quartet, there are also performances by those perhaps lesser known to the public, such as Teddy Edwards (who gets three performances on Disc 2) and Jimmy Giuffre (performing with Jim Hall on Disc 3).

Most of the clips are in black and white. In fact, Discs 2 and 3 each have only one color performance. Yet perhaps because of the limitations of black and white, the camera operators seem to focus more on a performer's technique. The viewer gets more close-ups of the style of guitarists Hall and Montgomery and the sax and piano players than tend to occur in the color clips. In fact, some of the color clips seem more interested in soft focus fades and transitions than simply letting the viewer see the artist at work.

Another feeling flows from the black and white clips. The live performances are full of '50s-style sets, seemingly omnipresent white shirts with skinny black ties and an abundance of black horn rimmed glasses. After a while, you begin to feel as if you're part of one of Hugh Hefner's late 1950s *Playboy's Penthouse* TV shows. Yet that is one luxury the DVDs provide. The only intros are rare ones by the musicians and there is no post-performance talk. This is music for music's sake.

This doesn't mean the series is without flaws. Some are beyond MVD's control. For example, the sound limitations of the original means the DVDs come with only two-channel sound so those with home theater audio set-ups will see no benefit. The most glaring flaws, however, could easily have been avoided.

Whether it was just the review copies or a production-wide mistake, the artist and track listings on the covers for Discs 2 and 3 do not match what appears on the DVDs. Going by the listings, Disc 2 opens with the Miles Davis Quintet with John Coltrane and Disc 3 opens with the Bill Evans Trio. Those discs actually open with Montgomery and the Dave Brubeck Quartet, respectively. While any jazz fan would love to see the Davis and Evans clips (and many of the others listed on the cases for those two DVDs), it seems apparent the track listings belong on a contemporaneously released East Coast series. There is no correlation whatsoever between the one-sheet covers (the front of which plainly state they are the West Coast series) and what appears on the DVD. As a result, the only way to get track listings is on the DVD itself.

Also undercutting the value of the series is a stunning lack of context. The discs and boxes contain no information about when or where the performances were recorded. This is dismaying for several reasons. There may be an intangible effect on the performance. Someone like Montgomery or even Mulligan may select different approaches or tunes

depending on whether it is a club date or television appearance, the location of a club date, the make-up of the audience and any time limitations.

More important, the viewer cannot necessarily place the performance in the scheme of the artist's career or the development of the sound. Given the fact the sole Chet Baker clip is in color and his somewhat aged appearance, it may be safe to conclude this was a performance later in his career, perhaps during the time he was living and performing almost exclusively in Europe. There is, however, no way to know. Likewise, because valve trombonist Bob Brookmeyer appears with the Gerry Mulligan Quartet, we can speculate that the performance was recorded sometime from 1954 to 1957, the only time when Brookmeyer was part of the Mulligan Quartet. Yet the viewer shouldn't be forced to research or speculate about such things.

Further compounding this flaw is that with few exceptions the DVDs and their boxes do not identify the performers other than the leader. When the occasional changes in the makeup of jazz groups is combined with the lack of information about when the performance was recorded, the average viewer cannot determine who is performing with Young, Brubeck, or Montgomery. One exception is the occasional clip where the ensemble is billed as featuring a particular artist, such as Brookmeyer with the Mulligan Quartet. The other is the broadcast of three pieces by Teddy Edwards on Disc 2 put the names of soloists on the screen as they played.

As a result, the series serves as little more than a brief introduction to or overview of the West Coast sound. While both fans and newcomers will find some excellent music, their understanding and full appreciation of it is marred by the lack of information surrounding the performances.

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