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GenEc DVD Review

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Yellowjackets - In Concert

I have to confess I pretty much ignored the Yellowjackets during the first couple dozen years of their existence. Despite the presence of original guitarist Robben Ford, the band struck me as somewhere between the bland pop-jazz of Spyro Gyra and the formulaic, barely-improvised stylings of so-called "smooth jazz".

But then about, maybe, four years ago, the Yellowjackets made an appearance at the 1891 Fredonia House. I went to the concert for three reasons. For one thing, my wife loves smooth jazz (and has raised my tolerance of the genre, though not my admiration), and wherever she wants to go, I gladly follow. Two, we serve as semi-regular volunteer ushers at the Opera House, so we get in free. But perhaps most significantly, three – despite the continuing excellence of SUNY Fredonia's much-honored jazz program (under the direction of former Maynard Ferguson and Woody Herman baritone saxist Bruce Johnstone), big-name jazz artists rarely make concert appearances in our fair town. (I didn't say never, just rarely.)

To my surprise, I was quickly won over. The Yellowjackets turned out to be substantially more powerful than the blatantly commercial lightweights I was expecting, first-rate musicians, both technically and creatively. This was music of substance, of imagination, of emotional impact, of originality. I'm glad to report that this newly issued DVD on the German Inakustik label (distributed in the US by MVD), recorded for the German television concert series "Ohne Filter" in 1994, captures all the energy and excitement that won me over during the band's Fredonia appearance.

There are 7 selections on this disc, everyone a highlight in its way. Right from the very beginning, with "Man Facing North" (primarily a feature for the deft six-string bass of Jimmy Haslip), a strong interplay of rhythms, arrangement, lyricism, and virtuosity by all four members of the band is constantly in evidence. The Yellowjackets work their way through fusion, light funk, melodic music of an accessible nature, and straight-ahead jazz. Saxman Bob Mintzer is particularly solid and fully in-command on the straight-ahead pieces, such as the hard-driving "One Music." Keyboardist Russell Ferrante is especially impressive on "Dewey (For Miles)", in which he conjures up a Davis-like muted-trumpet solo on synthesizer. Will Kennedy (who is no longer with the group) may not be the flashiest drummer you'll ever hear, but he is tasteful, always appropriate, and rhythmically inventive.

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