

# Ben Webster and Oscar Peterson — one more time

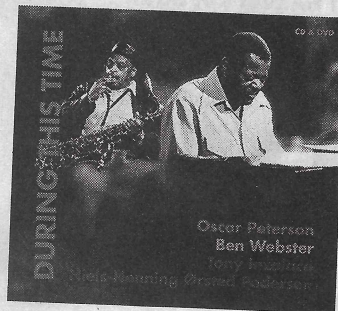
BY ARMAND LEWIS

**T**HE NATURE OF MUSICAL partnerships is not a permanent one. Musicians will work together until a better gig comes along or contractual (or geographic) differences render one-time collaborations impossible to resume. Yet, often the best players manage to find ways to reunite — if only to renew their musical acquaintance.

Over a ten-year period, tenor saxophonist Ben Webster would encounter pianist Oscar Peterson in a variety of musical settings. Starting out in Norman Granz' "Jazz at the Philharmonic" shows in the early 1950s, the two would record for Granz, as part of "JATP" as well as Granz' studio-bound "Jam Session" LPs. By the later 1950s, they would appear on each other's records, resulting in now classic albums such as Webster's "King of the Tenors" (1956) and "Oscar Peterson Meets Ben Webster" (1959).

Webster was a veteran of the big band era and a star with Duke Ellington's orchestra in the 1940s, where his big full tone and sweet emotional approach to ballads made him a prominent fixture. Later, Webster would join the expatriate jazz musicians re-settling in Copenhagen, where he lived and worked from the early 1960s forward.

Peterson was initially discovered by producer Norman Granz in 1949 and was instantly recognized as one of the finest pianists in jazz. He would travel the world almost continuously for over fifty years and record literally hundreds of albums, both as a



leader and featured sideman. While each of these musician's stars would independently rise to legendary status by the 1950s, they would not record together again until the early 1970s, when a German TV network would broadcast a performance of these two jazz icons for the first time in over a decade.

*Oscar Peterson, Ben Webster - During This Time* (MIG 80212) captures what would be the last reunion of these two giants in a televised concert released in both a CD (which also includes a DVD of the TV broadcast) as well as on a limited vinyl LP edition.

With backing from Europe's finest bass player Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen and drummer Tony Inzalaco, the album consists of tunes written by Webster, Duke Ellington or others associated with the Ellington songbook.

"The Webster original "Poutin" starts off the disc with a loping gait and late night tenor sax that could have come out of a 1940s noir crime movie. Webster was known as "The Brute" for his big raspy sound and listeners will instantly know why.

The Jules Styne standard "Sunday" bounces along showcasing Oscar Peterson,

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whose well-known mastery of the keyboard, still astonishes. Bassist Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen (who was with Peterson's trio at the time) along with drummer Tony Inzalaco anchor the rhythm section perfectly here and throughout the album.

Webster's other nickname was — of all things — "Gentle Ben," for his soft, breathy, sumptuous way with ballads. The Duke Ellington original "I Got It Bad And That Ain't Good" slows things down to a late night, bluesy, romantic feel.

Ellington's "Just Sunday" expands on the sweet side of Webster. Initially influenced by alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges (another Ellington band alum), one can hear Hodge's sweetness in Webster's tone, and it makes this a most haunting rendition.

"Perdido" and "Cotton Tail" are both associated not only with Duke Ellington, but also with Norman Granz' "Jazz at the Philharmonic" concerts, where Webster and Peterson likely battled it out over these tunes in many a show in the mid-1950s. Their love for both tunes still shows, keeping these perennials fresh and vibrant.

While this set is available on vinyl, the CD edition must be recommended for the included DVD of the original TV broadcast. Relatively little film or video of Ben Webster exists and the discovery of this television broadcast is not to be missed. Not only is the sound quality excellent, but the video picture itself is remarkably sharp and clear for a forty-year old program; basically as good as anything being shot today.

All the musicians in this concert are playing at the top of their game, but sadly it could not be repeated. Less than a year later, Ben Webster would suffer a cerebral hemorrhage, which ended his life at age sixty-four. But this final gem of a concert remains, allowing jazz fans to get together with Webster one more time.

Armand Lewis buys and sells rare Jazz LPs. He can be reached at [mrbluenote@peoplepc.com](mailto:mrbluenote@peoplepc.com)

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