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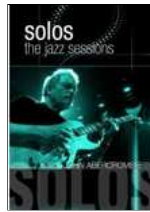
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DVD & Blu-ray Video Reviews

John Abercrombie – Solos: The Jazz Sessions (2010)

Guitarist John Abercrombie does something very rare – goes solo – and the results are excellent.

Published on September 09, 2010



John Abercrombie – Solos: The Jazz Sessions (2010)

Program: Open Land, Improvisation #3 (Improvisation on How Deep Is the Ocean), Alice in Wonderland, Jazz Folk, Convolution, A Nice Idea

Director: Daniel K. Berman

Studio: Original Spin Media/MVD Visual MVD5012D 26

Video: 16:9 color

Audio: English DD 5.1, PCM stereo

All regions

Length: 47:57

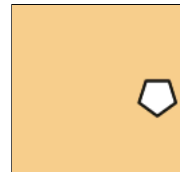
Rating: ****

Anyone who has followed John Abercrombie's career knows he has employed several techniques, including phase shifters, volume pedals, guitar synths, digital technology and more. He also became synonymous with the ECM sound that often combined jazz, rock, European and Asian/Indian influences. While a few of these technical and musical mannerisms are integrated into the six tracks on the DVD program, *John Abercrombie – Solos: The Jazz Sessions*, they are done so in an understated way due to Abercrombie's unaccompanied and subtle performance.

Abercrombie commences with a shortened rendering of "Open Land," the title track from his 1999 sextet release of the same name. Here, Abercrombie keeps the material terse and downplays the original's soul-tinged undertow and tells his story of expansion and movement – the "Open Land" – with a lightly rural characteristic echoed by his strategically used sustain. This tune, like the others, is also aided by the visuals: close-ups on the fretboard, strummed fingers and Abercrombie's emotive facial expressions give an in-depth glimpse at Abercrombie's style and presentation.

During one of several brief interviews that run before most music sections, Abercrombie explains part of his theory on improvisation, but actions speak more than words, and so his ideas are elucidated during an elegiac improvisation based on Irving Berlin's pop standard, "How Deep Is the Ocean," which Abercrombie issued as a guitar duet in 2005 with Frank Haunschild, in a trio format in 2006 and as another guitar duet with Joe Beck in 2008. In contrast to those versions, here there is a feeling of melancholy and brooding, as Abercrombie maintains a subdued raga-like drone on the lower register while slowly sweeping up and down the fretboard: at times he evokes John Fahey's spirit, although probably not consciously. Abercrombie continues his exploration of drone on "Jazz Folk," which he says is influenced by the oud, a Middle Eastern stringed instrument similar to a lute. Abercrombie initially offered this piece on his 2005 duet album with pianist Andy LaVerne, *A Nice Idea*, but the adaptation here is staged with more emphasis on chord runs, although Abercrombie retains a bop-ish trait.

Sammy Fain and Bob Hilliard's "Alice in Wonderland" has been a component of Abercrombie's repertoire for decades (he produced a trio translation for his 1985 outing *Current Events*). Like the previous pieces, Abercrombie shows his refinement on this oft-covered standard, once or twice bringing to mind Jim Hall or Pat Martino, and elevates



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his pacing and sense of swing to furnish a slightly more stirred up perception than the other material.

The audio quality is excellent: turn off the television and listeners can be transported to nirvana by hearing Abercrombie's warm acoustic tone and timbre on his custom Brian Moore electric guitar. The 5.1 Dolby surround sound provides balance for every nuance, and there are plenty to be conscious of in this low-key setting. But viewers will also appreciate the soft lighting, unobtrusive editing and superb cinematography – all hallmarks of this DVD series – that are levels above similar endeavors. There is one bonus, a three-minute trailer for a Greg Osby taping that is also part of the same Solos DVD series.

-- Doug Simpson

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