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Frisell on DVD

8 Sep



On September 1, Songline/Tone Field Productions released three Buster Keaton films – two shorts, 1920's

One Week and 1921's *The High Sign*, and the 1925 feature-length *Go West* – on a single DVD. All of the films were originally silent films, produced before “talkies” came into vogue in the early 1930s. These newly released versions feature original scores and playing by Bill Frisell, who is ably and inventively backed by bassist Kermit Driscoll and drummer/percussionist Joey Baron.

Watching these films is a real kick. Keaton was a clever and skilled film producer, and a compelling presence on the Big Screen. In all three films, he plays a hapless innocent, stumbling into absurd circumstances and situations that he is only minimally equipped to handle. These give rise to countless pratfalls. Repeatedly Keaton proves himself a master of broad physical comedy; he is forever falling from a roof or out the door of a moving boxcar. Houses collapse around him. In *The High Sign*, he is pursued by thugs even more hapless than himself. In *Go West*, he drifts west and, though he has no affinity for the job, finds work on a cattle ranch. The stories are not overly complicated. And yet they are something beyond mere passing entertainment. As Frisell says about the films: “Yes, there is the comedy, but there is something much deeper, a darker side.”

Frisell was commissioned to perform live score for these films – along with three other Keaton pictures – in the early '90s. In 1995, Nonesuch Records released Frisell's recorded scores for *The High Sign*, *One Week* and *Go West*. Not until now have the scores and movies been commercially released together.

At times, the juxtaposition of Frisell's effects-laden electric-guitar work with black-and-white film footage shot anywhere from 85 to 90 years ago is, in itself, distracting. But not often. With far greater frequency, Frisell's compositions, which allow plenty of room for improvising, complement and enhance the visuals. The guitarist's ambling, cowpokey score for *Go West*, for instance, is pitch perfect and not the least obtrusive.

In sum, *Films of Buster Keaton/Music by Bill Frisell* is a rewarding collaboration between Keaton and his cohorts and Frisell and his. These films are the cinematic equivalent of Fats Waller recordings. To a 21st-century sensibility, they appear antiquated – which, indeed, they are – but there is no denying their enduring charm. Likewise, there's no denying the empathy, thoughtfulness and superb musicianship brought to the films by Frisell and his bandmates, who so warmly and winningly insinuate themselves into the proceedings.

Also on September 1, Songline/Tone Field Productions, in conjunction with Original Spin Media, released a second DVD, this one titled *Bill Frisell: Solos*, which captures the guitarist alone onstage at the Berkeley Church in Toronto, Canada. On the film, Frisell performs original tunes; classics by Bob Dylan, Hank Williams, and George and Ira Gershwin; and a handful of traditional American songs (i.e., “Wildwood Flower” and a perfectly lovely rendering of “Shenandoah”).

For more information, go to www.songtone.com and www.solosjazz.com.

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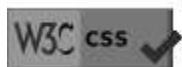
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