

Jason Moran

Last decade witnessed an unprecedented number of new jazz artists making their recording debuts. One of the most impressive and creatively inclined youngsters to give voice to the future of the music was Jason Moran, whose first CD, *Soundtrack to Human Motion*, was heralded as a remarkably considered and stylistically complete album (Ben Ratliff of *The New York Times*, who ranked *Soundtrack* his top album of 1999, aptly summed up its allure as "soulfully elegant and disquieting"). The 25-year-old pianist continues to excite notice with his sophomore Blue Note outing *Facing Left*, a trio date with the rhythm team of bassist Tarus Mateen and drummer Nasheet Waits.

The album features a rich diversity of tunes, including several Moran originals, a couple of distinctive takes on Duke Ellington pieces, two works adapted from movie soundtracks, a song by Jaki Byard, a ballad by pop singer Bjork and the trio's in-and-out, mood-shifting theme song "Another One" composed by bassist Mateen. Not one of the thirteen numbers is over six minutes long and some are as short as two minutes. "The music on this record is a fusion of all my influences," Moran states on his web-site, www.jasonmoran.com.

In talking about the new disc, he adds, "The approach I take with every record is to give the listener a variety of grooves and concepts. In addition, on this album, the trio takes over, capturing how all three of us interact in a live setting-no inhibitions. As for the length of the tunes, I was surprised. I didn't realize they were so short, but then I figured, well, we've said enough so there's no need to go on. In concert we take the tunes further, but in the studio the vibe was created quickly and everything moved at a good pace."

Like its predecessor, *Facing Left* is produced by saxophonist Greg Osby, who, according to Moran's original plans, was slated to appear on the album. But because of a scheduling conflict, the pianist decided to focus on documenting his working trio. "It was fate," he says. "Tarus, Nasheet and I had been playing together a lot, so it made sense to record us as a unit. Plus, it provided us with a challenge: coming up with interesting material without an out-front instrument like a horn."

Since breaking into the rising-star ranks of jazz in 1997 as a member of Osby's band on his Blue Note album, *Further Ado*, the Houston-born, New York-based Moran has been on a roll. He's garnered critical plaudits touring and recording with such artists as Cassandra Wilson, Steve Coleman and Stefon Harris. He was also featured alongside label-mates Osby, Harris, and Mark Shim in the Blue Note super-group, *New Directions*, which issued its eponymous first CD earlier this year.

Beginning as a classical pianist when he was six and later being drawn to jazz through the magic of Thelonious Monk, Moran was a member of the jazz big band and jazz quartet at Houston's High School for the Performing and Visual Arts (where he met drummer Eric Harland who years later recommended him for the Osby gig). In 1993, Moran moved to New York to study with pianist Jaki Byard at the Manhattan School of Music and later took private lessons with Muhal Richard Abrams and Andrew Hill.

All three of Moran's piano mentors figure prominently in his creative outlook, especially in regards to composing. "They all utilize alternate methods for composing," he explains. "That really helped to open up my brain. I've learned compositional options and I don't feel like I have to wait for God to possess my body to write a piece. There are tons of different ways of coming up with fresh music." Moran cites the quick-scampering groove, "Thief Without Loot," which is a musical transcription of a Japanese woman's

voice, to illustrate his point. "I got the idea from Hermeto Pascoal." says Moran, who also added a Rhodes electric piano voice into the mix on the track. "I transcribed every inflection, note and rhythm of my friend's voice, then added a bass line later."

Other Moran originals include the beauty, "Three of the Same from Two Different," a celebration of the nuclear family he was raised in (his parents and their three sons); the hip-hop influenced "Lies are Sold," where Moran also adds the Rhodes' color; the intense drama with the pun-ish title "Battle of the Cattle Acts" ("It reminds me of a battle because of its uneasy, uneven quality") with its subtle B3 organ brush strokes; and the reflective solo piano end song "Gangsterism on Wood" (a variation on Soundtrack to Human Motion's "Gangsterism on Canvas").

The gem of the batch is Moran's melodic-and-out interpretation of Icelandic pop singer Bjork's ballad "Joga." "Greg hipped me to her third album Homogenic," Moran says. "I must have listened to that 400 times on the street, in planes, wherever. It's a classic that I rank right up there with A Love Supreme."

The Ellington pieces-the whimsical and compelling "Later" which opens the CD and the off-kilter swinger "Wig Wise"- were originally arranged for a tribute concert in New York City in December 1999 that also featured Abrams, Hill, Randy Weston, Geri Allen and John Hicks. "Neither of these are Duke standards," Moran says. "I'm sure people are going to think that these are way off the beaten path, but every piece of information I used came straight from Duke's hand."

Moran also pays homage to the late Jaki Byard by taking a jaunt through his tune "Twelve." "Jaki gave me this when I was studying with him. It's a blues, but it's split in half with two 6-bar phrases vs. three 4-bar phrases," he explains. "Jaki taught me so much from the old school guys like Earl Hines and he clearly showed me that the pathway to the new comes through the old."

The two soundtrack numbers are the intriguing, disjointed-march "Yojimbo," from Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's film of the same name, and the mysterious, drum-exploding "Murder of Don Fanucci" from Francis Ford Coppola's Godfather Part II. "Yojimbo means bodyguard in Japanese," says Moran, who explains that the film is like a Japanese Western where a samurai roams the countryside helping people down on their luck. "The melody is simple with a straight beat like R&B that people can understand. As for the Godfather number, it comes from the part in the film where an assassination takes place while a celebration is going on. The drums signify the battle."

As for the title of the album, Moran based it on a self-portrait by painter Egon Schiele titled "Facing Left." "Schiele's paintings are very raw portrayals of people," he says. "Everyone is very bony, frail, emaciated, but with rosy cheeks. And the heads are bigger than the bodies. To me his self-portrait embodies the trio. We're freely expressive and not rigid. We're not confined to formatted or prescribed arrangements. We're not a dinner or country club trio. We don't quite know where we're going, but we're facing left and headed in the right direction."