



JOHN BEASLEY

LETTER TO HERBIE. Resonance Records RCD1003. *4 A.M., Bedtime Voyage, Chan's Song, Three Finger Snap, The Naked Camera, Eye of the Hurricane, Diana, Hear and Now, Still Time, Vein Melter.*

PERSONNEL: John Beasley, piano; Roy Hargrove, trumpet; Christian McBride, bass; Jess "Tain" Watts, drums.

By Bill Donaldson

This would appear to be a perilous year to start a recording company. After all, some of the biggest corporations in the recording and entertainment industries have undergone significant restructurings only recently. Striving to remain profitable, they have been challenged by on-line music availability and the democratization of (free) performance access through various media. However, Resonance Records, based near Los Angeles is venturing into the marketing of jazz recordings with a creative business plan that allows the company to focus on the artists, rather than on its profits. Instead of spending excessive amounts of time fretting about stockholder returns, the parent company of Resonance Records organized as a 501(C)(3) non-profit entity to make sure that its mission of promoting quality music remains firmly in sight and within reach.

Resonance Records' first two releases suggest what to expect as the label grows. As the first entry in its Heirloom Series, Gene Harris's *Live in London* is a previously unreleased recording of his European

group, reinforcing his reputation for hard-swinging groove, as irresistible as was his ebullience. Second, another talented pianist, John Beasley, recorded a tribute to one of his primary influences, Herbie Hancock, thereby indicating how Resonance will promote the work of jazz talent deserving a larger audience.

True to Resonance Records's goal of showcasing deserving under-appreciated—though in this case, not struggling—jazz talent, John Beasley's *Letter to Herbie* applies top-shelf resources to his tribute to one of his primary inspirations, Herbie Hancock. The quality of Resonance's presentations of artists is evident in the recording. The sound engineering by George Klabin and Pierre Paul through sonic clarity emphasizes the warmth of Beasley's sound as he indeed does adapt Hancock's style to an interpretation of some of his music without being imitative. Beasley was more aware than anyone else of the need not simply to replay some of Hancock's music, which of course no one but Hancock could play as well. Instead, Beasley takes a fresh look at some of the music. Rather than personalizing or re-harmonizing the classic "Maiden Voyage," Beasley, noting the similarity of feeling between the two songs, combines it, subtly and invitingly, with "Tell Me a Bedtime Story." Beasley weaves in phrases from each to create his own "Bedtime Voyage" with the assistance of top-shelf talent like Roy Hargrove, Steve Tavaglione, Christian McBride and Jeff "Tain" Watts. Obviously very familiar with the breadth of Hancock's works, rather than just a single favorite period, Beasley chooses some of the less obvious Hancock compositions for exploration, such as a segment of his sound track for Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up*. Funky and infectious, Beasley's version recalls "Comin' Home Baby" while allowing for improvisational space, unforced and flowing, particularly with Beasley on Fender Rhodes. One of my favorite Hancock compositions, but one that is played too infrequently, is "Chan's Song" from *Round Midnight*, the rousing concert

conclusion to that movie, and Beasley takes it as a relaxed piano trio piece for repeated choruses of improvisation. *Head Hunters*, another of Hancock's innovative and commercial successes, is represented by "Vein Melter," allowing McBride to provide his booming electric bass throb and Hargrove to play freely over the mixture of electronic effects and rhythm before the shimmering final fade-out. Though Beasley has established a busy career working most recently as musical director for Queen Latifah or with the "American Idol" band—not to mention his earlier work with Miles Davis, James Brown, Dianne Reeves or Freddie Hubbard—his reverence for Hancock's distinctive style and groundbreaking albums led to his writing of two new pieces for *Letter to Herbie*. Beasley's "3 Finger Snap," though not intentionally at first, recalls Hancock's "One Finger Snap." Beasley's bright chords, shimmering arpeggios and bristling accents leave no doubt about his debt to Hancock. Nor do Beasley's splashes of color and syncopated rhythms and pinwheeling phrases and recurring swing of "4AM." Beasley's other original composition is "Hear and Now," which he modeled after Hancock's "Dolphin Dance," providing blocked-chord ascents and flowing lines to complement the stroll of his theme.

The commitment of Resonance Records to the perpetuation of high-quality jazz certainly is evident on its first two releases, both in terms of production expertise and artistic selection. With future recordings from Bill Cunliffe, Claudio Roditi, Christian Howes and Toninho Horta, among others, jazz listeners have much to anticipate as that rare entity of 2008, a new record label, establishes itself. ■