

ED JACKSON
Wake-Up Call

New World Records 80451

Given where we start out, none of us knows where we'll end up. Reader, ask yourself: when you were a child, did you ever suspect you'd grow up to love jazz music? The choices we make, the friendships and alliances we forge, the tastes shaped by innumerable conscious and unconscious factors, can guide us far afield, inch by inch.

So it is with Ed Jackson. Even his fine work with the cooperative 29th Street Saxophone Quartet may leave you unprepared for the richness of this disc, his debut as (sole) leader. Life is never reducible to one operating principle; it's rarely simple or symmetrical, yet it follows its own subtle logic from one phase to the next. The music on *Wake-Up Call* has the same sort of organic intricacy and grace.

You have to be very sure of yourself to record an album with four pieces that run nine minutes or longer, one of which, the title track, is an airplay-resistant 13 minutes long as well as being structurally complex. It's not that the individual parts of these compositions are forbidding--there's lots of melodic, swinging improvising and ensemble interaction over the course of this disc. But when you contemplate the big picture, Jackson's daring becomes apparent. Even when he's working with a standard tune, he chooses from an array of possibilities and sidesteps the ordinary.

"So many composers end a piece with the A section they began with," Jackson says. "That's cool, but for me, it's almost as if they gave up: 'What the hell, let's just go back to the beginning.' My philosophy of writing is, you start with an idea and then develop it, see where it takes you."

When you look at his life, you see why he thinks that way. For Ed Jackson, the trek began in Jamaica, in the eastern part of the New York borough of Queens. He was born there May 21, 1959, but the story really begins in the same neighborhood nine years later, when he first picked up an alto saxophone:

"My brother Dave, who plays bass, and is seven years older than me, used to bring his friends over to the house, and they'd jam. Of course I wanted to jump on the bandwagon too. I don't want to give anyone the impression I'm some big heavy funkster, but I took up the alto because of Maceo [Parker]. I used to hear James Brown say, 'Maceo! Blow your horn!' and I thought that was *the* hippest thing. So I started taking lessons, and began jamming with my brother's friends--Weldon Irvine was one of them--and playing funk in local garage bands."

As Ed tells it, Jamaica had a thriving music scene in the late Sixties and early Seventies. It was a relatively hospitable part of the city for black New Yorkers; between Jamaica and the adjoining community of St. Albans, a lot of prominent musicians had settled in. Jackson's free-associative list includes Coltrane, James Brown, Basie, and Illinois Jacquet. And as any Long Island Railroad commuter knows, Jamaica is also a major way station and bottleneck for travelers heading east.

Jackson's own roundabout path took him west. As a kid he hated sports; nevertheless his parents sent him to sports camp every summer, sheer torture. When he was 12 or so he persuaded his folks to send him instead to the Lighthouse Arts and Music Camp in Pine Grove, Pennsylvania. (He attended several

years running, and eventually taught there.) One of the instructors was Hankus Netsky from Boston's New England Conservatory of Music. That led indirectly to Jackson's attending the NEC, where he majored in Jazz Studies and was graduated with distinction. Actually, chance played a part in his landing there, too. He'd applied to Juilliard as well, but mistakenly showed up a day late for his audition, "probably the best thing I'd ever done."

While at New England, Jackson became lead alto in instructor Jaki Byard's big band, The Apollo Stompers, and played on two tracks of Third Stream honcho Ran Blake's 1980 album *Film Noir*. Ed's fellow students included Tom Varner, Steve Johns, and Jamie Baum, all of whom are heard on *Wake-Up Call*. Varner drafted Ed into his Boston quartet, and has featured him in most of the bands and recording dates he's led since.

In college, Ed acquired a taste for playing chamber music in various combinations, among them a group of four saxes. Back in New York after graduation, he encouraged his former classmate baritone player Jim Hartog to start a saxophone quartet; 29th Street was born with the addition of tenor Rich Rothenberg and alto Bobby Watson. A decade later, with the Quartet still active, Watson recruited its members into his Tailor Made Big Band.

Also in the early Eighties, Ed began a two-year association with the Roy Haynes Quartet; "Played Twice" was in the drummer's book. Ed had been recommended by his brother Dave, who'd been with Roy for five years, but who'd left the group before Ed joined. And in '83, Ed Jackson made the first of eight yearly international tours with Jamaica's funk franchise, The Fatback Band.

Much as certain jazz spokespersons crow about artistic purity, Jackson's experience is typical of working musicians in the real world, whose resumes may appear to be fraught with contradictions. Jackson welcomes the diversity disparate working situations have afforded him: "Among Fatback, Roy Haynes and 29th Street, you got the funk, you got jazz, you got the out--well, okay, the Quartet isn't really *that* out."

Jackson now lives a couple of miles over the Nassau County line, just outside the New York city limits, but his roots in Jamaica remain strong. He's continued his by-now nearly lifelong association with local guru, keyboardist, composer, and playwright Weldon Irvine; and the Jacksons Ed and Dave play on the late-Eighties album *Weldon and the Cats*, issued on Weldon's Nodlew label. (Irvine's bopping "One for Bud," by the way, pays tribute to Bud Powell.) Most weekends in 1992 Ed led the house band at Jamaica's Club Tamara; he met trumpeter James Zollar when he came by to sit in one night. In 1993, when the ongoing Jackson Brothers band needed a pianist, their drummer Greg Latty tipped them to John Stetch, brand- new in town from Montreal (he's originally from Edmonton, Alberta).

The only musician on *Wake-Up Call* Jackson hadn't played with before he assembled his octet is trombonist Clark Gayton, who'd come highly recommended by no less than four sidefolk, including Zollar, who's played with Clark in tuba-player Bob Stewart's quintet.

It has become a critical cliché to say that eight-piece bands combine the flexibility of a small group with the concentrated power of a big band; maybe that's why Jackson takes a strikingly different tack. Yes, he exploits the massed power of five horns, and they may punch like a big-band brass section (as on "Not for Granted," co-written with neighborhood buddy Charles Morais). But Jackson's deliberate use

of space gives his music its own singular flavor.

There certainly are some unusual features here. What non-bassist, for example, would begin a tune with an improvisation that continues even after the entrance of the horns' lava-flow written line, as on "Not for Granted"? It's an excellent example of how Ed may keep more than one idea going at the same time, how his pieces are rarely about any single thing. After all, one way to make interesting records is to devise music which doesn't give up all its secrets on one or two hearings.

All of Ed's original tunes--and producer Varner's--were written specifically for this project, some of them not very far in advance. No two compositions are alike; indeed, on only three tracks is the instrumentation precisely the same. Jackson had the staccato rhythm of a machine gun in mind when he wrote "Under the Gun," but the title also refers to time constraints as the session drew near, and to modern pressures in general. It's the only track where he plays soprano sax, which he'd started on back in high school, and which he plays in a different style from his alto. Check out Steve Johns here too: "Under the Gun" has a heavy backbeat, but his between-the-beats snare hits give the piece an effective polymeric looseness and his cowbell accents under the piano solo, introduce a faint Latin accent. Johns demonstrates how an improviser brings composed music to life, even when he's not taking a solo.

Ed's arrangement of Monk's "Played Twice" shows how Jackson avoids repeating himself, on a tune where repetition is (as the title implies) built in. Two distinct ensemble interludes frame Tom Varner's French horn solo--the latter is basically improvised, while the former revolves around one phrase pulled from the melody and staggered by the horns, appropriately suggesting double vision. In the same literal vein, you can follow Varner's crafty, jabbing solo itself; his conscientiously paired phrases take Monk's title as an interpretive guideline. Note too how John Stetch resists evoking the composer's quirky keyboard attack--even at the end, where he's offered a great temptation to scrawl Monk's signature sign-off, a thrice-chiming treble chord.

Stetch, by the way, contributes the (literally) revamped "Have You Met Miss Jones?", which confirms the same ideology as Jackson's composing and arranging: Any thematic material lends itself to extensive permutation.

Varner is no slouch when it comes to involuted composing and non-obvious structure either, as his own recent recordings make clear. After a pendular riff is introduced just over three minutes into his "Hungry Edward," the long piece unfolds logically, even after that lick has been retired. The solo alto tag is as right as it is unexpected.

The long tracks are the most obviously complex, but it's not that the quintet pieces are simple or predictable: witness the short coda/last movement tacked on to "To Have or To Be." (It's named for Erich Fromm's book, but don't read anything into that. Jackson saw the jacket in a bookstore and just liked the way the title sounded.)

As a leader of a band full of good soloists, Ed strikes a balance between giving everyone a taste and showcasing his own talents. His supple phrasing and internal drive are his own, but then playing next to Bobby Watson for years gives you powerful incentive to stake out your own turf on alto. I can, though, hear echoes of Maceo Parker in Ed's excitable staccato on "Hungry Edward"; Jackson

explained to me that Maceo was an early inspiration.

Which goes to show: Even when you try to make a piece—or a career—wind up someplace different from where it began, a unified vision is apt to reveal itself anyway. No matter how varied your experience, everything comes together in the end.

—Kevin Whitehead

Kevin Whitehead *writes for* CD Review, Downbeat, and Pulse, and is jazz critic for National Public Radio's Fresh Air.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

with Ran Blake:

Film Noir. Arista Novus AN3019.

with the Fatback Band:

Is This The Future. Spring Records SP 1-6738.

Phoenix. Cotillion Records 90168-1.

The Greatest. Mastermix Records 01 352 6035.

With Love. Spring Records SPR-CT-6741.

with The Andy Jafee Sextet:

Manhattan Projections. Stash Records ST247.

with The 29th Street Saxophone Quartet:

Live. Red Records 123223-2.

Pointillistic Groove. Osmosis 6002.

The Real Deal. Antilles 314-510-941-2.

Underground. Antilles 422-848-415-2.

Watch Your Step. Antilles 314-510-942-2.

Your Move. Antilles 314-512-524-2.

with Tom Varner:

Long Night Big Day. New World/CounterCurrents 80410-2.

Motion/Stillness. Soul Note 12-1067-1.

The Mystery of Compassion. Soul Note 12-1217-2.

Tom Varner Quartet. Soul Note 12-1017.

with Weldon & The Kats:

Volume 1. Nodlew Music.

with Bernard Wright:

Nard. Arista GRP 5011.

Executive producer: Arthur Moorhead

Producer: Tom Varner

Engineer: Jon Rosenberg

Assistant engineers: Bill Emmons, Frederic Kevorkian

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- 1 Played Twice (Thelonius Monk, arr. Ed Jackson) (6:05)
- 2 Not for Granted (Ed Jackson/Charles Morais, arr. Ed Jackson) (10:40)
- 3 To Have or To Be (Ed Jackson) (3:41)
- 4 Under the Gun (Ed Jackson) (9:00)
- 5 Hungry Edward (Tom Varner) (11:20)
- 6 Have You Met Miss Jones? (Richard Rodgers/Lorenz Hart, arr. John Stetch) (7:39)
- 7 Wake-Up Call (Ed Jackson) (13:05)
- 8 Boots and Fur (Tom Varner) (1:52)
- 9 One for Bud (Weldon Irvine) (6:22)

Ed Jackson - alto sax (soprano sax on *Under the Gun*)

Rich Rothenberg - tenor sax

James Zollar - trumpet (flugelhorn on *To Have or To Be*)

Tom Varner - French horn

Clark Gayton - trombone (bass trombone on *Played Twice*)

John Stetch - piano

Dave Jackson - bass

Steve Johns - drums

Jamie Baum - flute on *One for Bud*

Not for Granted, *To Have or To Be*, *Under the Gun*, and *Wake-Up Call* published by Second Floor Music

(BMI), *Boots and Fur* and *Hungry Edward* published by Tom Varner Music (BUMA/BMI), *Played Twice* published by Thelonius Music (BMI), *One for Bud* published by Nodlew Music (BMI), and *Have You Met Miss Jones?* published by Chappell and Co. (ASCAP).

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