

DOWN BEAT

March 1996

Million To One Palmetto 2014

★★★★

The first time through, Steve Million's debut recording seems oddly self-effacing. True, he produced it, arranged it and composed six of the 10 tunes. But it isn't until track six, Monk's "Boo Boo's Birthday," that he gives himself the first solo. In the dominant presence of Randy Brecker and Chris Potter, you almost don't notice Million's thoughtful, understated piano.

By the third listening, the polished unity of Million's project begins to reveal itself. He prepared for this album through many years in the jazz trenches of Kansas City and Chicago.

The tunes are varied (the light Latin feel of "Eisenbleu," the extended structure of "Mood Point," the polite $\frac{3}{4}$ funk of "Blue Lizard"), but they share a basis in formal coherence and smooth, rounded contours. For all his subtlety as a soloist, Million the leader is strong enough to impose the tone and texture of his music upon Brecker and Potter. On "Missing Page," Brecker's flugelhorn flows directly out of Million's intention, its sighs and flutters circling around questions with lost answers. The complex song form "Mood Point" provides a cerebral premise for Potter's tenor solo. From a few core ideas he derives logical subsets and indirect corollaries. One of the pleasures of *Million To One* is that it is devoid of wasted notes. The statements of Brecker and Potter begin deep inside every song and make lucid, intelligent, concise improvements upon each. (Potter displays growth on every recording. Listen to how he treats time on "Duckbutter," defying the pressure to hurry.)

The engineer for this date, A.T. Michael MacDonald, uses a fully restored 1959 Ampex 351 vacuum-tube tape recorder with vintage microphones. The warmth and naturalness of the audio quality (especially sweet on Ron Vincent's cymbals) make a major contribution to the feeling of wholeness that distinguishes *Million To One*.

—Thomas Conrad