

JAZZ IMPROV[®]

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Steve Million

TRUTH IS... - Palmetto Records, 71 Washington Pl # 1A, New York, NY 10014; Tel. 1-800-PALM-CDs; Email: info@palmetto-records.com; web site: www.palmetto-records.com. *Right Place, Wrong Key; Truth Is...; Terror of Toni Town; Fireflies; All the Things You Are; Perfectly Spaced; Shytown (for Robert Shy); Eiderdown; Nomadrigal; Blackwater; Ain't That Familiar; Gallops Gallop.*

PERSONNEL: Steve Million, piano; Randy Brecker, trumpet; Dick Oatts, saxophone; Steve Cardenas, guitar; Michael Moore, bass; Ron Vincent, drums.

By Andrew Scott

"Million's style is as eclectic as his tastes"

Jazz piano is currently finding more than its usual share of champions. Jackie Terrason, Eric Reed, and Benny Green are just a few familiar names. Others still have graduated to "first-name-only status" -- Brad, Cyrus and Mulgrew. Chicago pianist Steve Million may not yet have the cache of those aforementioned players, but his capabilities as both jazz soloist and bandleader aren't in any danger of being overlooked here. A fine interpreter of standards ("All the Things You Are"), blues ("Right Place, Wrong Key"), and modern vehicles ("Eiderdown"), Million's style is as eclectic as his tastes.

There are many rewards here, not the least of which are the contributions of trumpeter Randy Brecker and saxophonist Dick Oatts. It is nice to hear Brecker in a resolutely "jazz" outing again. The trumpeter can develop a bad case of "run-on-fingers" when placed in a funk/fusion context, but here his contributions are sturdy, erudite, and most importantly, musical. Dick Oatts, who doubles on soprano, draws his voice

from contemporary sounds, but can still race a blues into a sweat when required. And Million, for all his formidable technique, leads the outing in a way that lights up the other performances, rather than overshadowing them. Stylistically, the pianist is all over the map, with Monk and Jarrett being only two points of reference among many. Rounding out the record is the fine trio of guitarist Steve Cardenas, bassist Michael Moore and drummer Ron Vincent. Cardenas, a capable soloist with a warm, listener-friendly tone, turns in a spirited performance. Moore and Vincent are quietly supportive throughout.

Well worth the wait is "Gallops Gallop," the CD's last track and Million's foray into solo piano Monk-ery. It is irreverent, silly and "lampshade-on-the-head" funny, adding a well-placed bit of humor to the mix. Solo piano has been given a much-needed "shot-in-the-arm" recently by Fred Hersch, and as a medium, it is notoriously revealing. My favorite Duke Ellington anecdote goes a long way in explaining its popularity. The occasion was one of the many "Jazz at the Philharmonic" concerts that the Duke was involved in. Oscar Peterson and his great trio of Ray Brown and Ed Thigpen had just finished bringing the house down in classic style. "Magnificent, as usual," Ellington intones when the two pianists meet backstage. "Tell me," Duke coyly asks Peterson, "have you ever thought about playing solo?" Peterson, admitted that he had but was unsure what an audience's reaction would be to a full solo program. "Oh, I think they would like that very much," Ellington responds, "in fact, and no disrespect to the trio, I think that it is time for people to enjoy the caviar...without the eggs and onions."

Anecdotes aside, Steve Million offers up well-crafted tunes and fine jazz playing on this 1999 release. Here, be it caviar, eggs or onions... good taste always holds sway.