

All About Jazz

Mike Westbrook & Company: A Bigger Show - Live

Duncan Heining Published: February 19, 2016

For the last few years, pianist-composer Mike Westbrook has been leading a very fine big band down in Devon but this is the first time they have made it on to CD. In fact, this is an expanded ensemble with three vocalists, two bass players, two guitarists and two drummers. The clue is in the title, this truly is *A Bigger Show* with the emphasis on the word "show." Some people have never got what the Westbrooks have been up to these four or so decades. They create jazz entertainments, themed and structured performances that owe something to circus, something to vaudeville, something to theatre and a whole lot to jazz. Westbrook's inspiration lies in the concerts that the Ellington band would perform in the thirties featuring everything from Duke's suites to r&b, pop and comedy songs. The "art" lay more in the "how" rather than in the "what" of the music, in the juxtapositions between different performance elements. *A Bigger Show* builds upon the earlier Westbrook entertainment, *The Waxeywork Show* with new songs and additional lyrics to those from "Waxeywork." Sadly, the chances of a DVD to accompany the CD are slim because this feels like something to be seen as well as heard. To call some of these musicians "semi-pros" does less than grant them due recognition. Take Dave Holdsworth on pocket trumpet and sousaphone. Despite gracing many British jazz records over the years, music has never been his first career. Then there's trumpeter Mike Brewer and listen to his fluegelhorn solo on the long "Propositions." I suspect many a young jazzer would feel a twinge of envy on hearing him here. The key with this band is commitment and the joy of the making music. *A Bigger Show* offers nearly two hours of music, from the "roll up, roll up" fanfare of "Gizzards All Gory" through the march-like "Juxtapositions," which explores the strange of world of the wax work show, to the circus of the imagination that is "Lovers Galore." The latter features some excellent guitarwork and bone-shaking trombone from Andy Dore. I'm guessing 'Tricky' Sam Nanton will be smiling up in heaven when he hears that sound. But then the playing throughout is first-rate. Alto saxophonist Roz Harding always impresses but damn near surpasses her own high standards on the lovely waltz "Freedom's Crown," as she plays both within and against the prevailing orchestral accompaniment, rhythmically and harmonically. Harding features again on "Propositions" along with all the other members of the sax section. The number is a slow-build constructed around a series of five sax solos, Mike Brewer's fluegelhorn spot and Dave Holdsworth on pocket trumpet. Everyone acquits themselves extraordinarily well but special credit to Gary Bayley on tenor for his playing here and in his duet with the great Alan Wakeman on the big band swing-into-bebop of "Scattered and Cold." But for my money the best track here is the long blues "Gas, Dust, Stone" where the voices of Kate Westbrook, Billy Bottle and Martine Walter really come into their own. It also features some first-rate work from the rhythm section, some perfectly tight and greasy riffing from the horns and some great guitar from Jesse Molins and Matthew North. It's all great music, great entertainment and great fun. Ain't that what it's all about? Just don't tell the jazz police.