



The Great Un-American Songbook, Volumes I & II
Ed Palermo Big Band (Cuneiform)
 by Mark Keresman

The Ed Palermo Big Band (EPBB) has existed in one form or another for over three decades. Saxophonist and arranger-to-be Ed Palermo was inspired by The Beatles, Edgar Winter and Frank Zappa from the rock side of the street and Cannonball Adderley, John Coltrane and Charles Tolliver from the jazz side. EPBB became well-known for its interpretations of material from Zappa's massive book of compositions—further, Palermo internalized Zappa's satirical, earnestly irreverent approach...bringing us, Dear Reader, to *The Great Un-American Songbook Volumes I & II*.

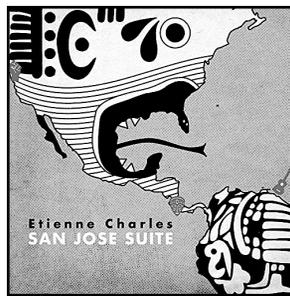
Palermo is of the generation of jazz players that proudly acknowledges the impact of non-jazz inspirations. As if to drive that point home—and perhaps vex what some hepcats refer to as the “jazz police” with their pronounced devotion to *The Great American Songbook*—his latest opus pays tribute to popular songs (mostly) from the '60s-70s British rock canon. Songs by King Crimson, The Nice, Jethro Tull, Cream, Traffic and, of course, those Beatles get the big band treatment in a manner evoking the great post-Swing Era jazz orchestras of Count Basie, Woody Herman, Thad Jones/Mel Lewis and Gil Evans—majestic, intricately and briskly arranged and swinging mightily. (Also worth noting: the '70s big bands of Herman and Evans included judicious rock influences and the latter even did an all Jimi Hendrix album.)

The tone of the original “Eleanor Rigby” is that of whimsical melancholy, but Palermo gives this version a muscular yet muted melodramatic grandeur with a sardonic sense of swing besides. Cream's “As You Said” gets an Ellingtonian sweep with its vivid, pronounced arrangement for brass and courtly rise-and-fall reading of the melody; it also has a Gallic tinge thanks to the elegant solo violin of Katie Jacoby. On the other hand, King Crimson's “Lark's Tongues in Aspic, Part 2” was always ominous and here is even more so, Palermo adding dramatic soundtrack-like heft to the lurching, menacing theme, contrasting it with quieter, sparser passages featuring the sweetly mournful swirl of violin.

There are a few vocal tracks, including Arthur Brown's “Fire” by Zappa alumnus Napoleon Murphy Brock, who applies a soulful croon while retaining some of the original's over-the-top theatricality. Jethro Tull's “Beggar's Farm” begins with a wry, bittersweet lilting melody; enter guitarist Bruce McDaniel's droll, Harry Connick-like vocals before growing into a bluesy romp with darting ensemble work worthy of Basie, then erupting into genial bebop highlighting tasty trumpet and saxophone soloing/trade-offs over percussive acoustic piano. The pick-to-click highlight of this set is a medley of Miles Davis' “Nardis” and George Harrison's bitter “Don't Bother Me”—this beautifully alternates an absorbing wistful melody with the wail of violin and driving, clipped passages for horns, tossing in Latin-flavored cadences for good measure.

If you like your jazz serious or hate rock music, this is not for you. If you enjoy classic rock and big band jazz served up with a sense of fun, make a splash here (and wait up for the bonus track).

For more information, visit cuneiformrecords.com. Palermo is at Iridium May 8th. See Calendar.



San Jose Suite
Etienne Charles (Culture Shock Music)
 by Joel Roberts

The latest release from trumpeter and educator Etienne Charles is a 10-part suite connecting the musical traditions of three communities sharing the name San Jose in his native Trinidad, Costa Rica and northern California. It's an ambitious project exploring how indigenous peoples throughout the Americas have used music as a form of resistance and sustenance when confronted with conquest and colonialism.

The album covers a lot of ground geographically and musically, intertwining elements of reggae and calypso with Latin jazz, postbop and free improv as it travels from the Caribbean to Central America to Silicon Valley and across centuries of history. But Charles and his superb sextet (saxophonist Brian Hogans, guitarist Alex Wintz, pianist Victor Gould, bassist Ben Williams and drummer John Davis) handle the diverse musical settings seamlessly.

The festive opener, “Boruca”, pays tribute to Costa Rica's Boruca people, evoking an annual celebration of the community's resilience after battling Spanish conquistadors. “Revolt” is one of the album's most dramatic movements, drawing on propulsive percussion and stormy saxophone and guitar solos to commemorate an 1837 revolt by Africans in Trinidad. “Muwekma”, meanwhile, is a moody modal-jazz piece based on a Native American chant and features a particularly poignant trumpet solo.

The suite's closing movement, “Speed City”, focused on San Jose, California, shifts somewhat abruptly to a funk and hip-hop vibe as it recalls the city's Civil Rights battles of the '60s. It's an effective means, however, of capturing the mood of the era, with heavy drum, bass and Fender Rhodes grooves playing behind enlightening spoken-word contributions from Dr. Harry Edwards, one of the movement's leaders.

For all the weighty issues Charles deals with here, the music never comes off as pedantic or preachy. It retains a sense of beauty and joyousness that speaks to the fortitude and endurance of the people and traditions it honors.

For more information, visit etiennecharles.com. Charles is at Zankel Hall May 9th. See Calendar.



One More For The Road (with Danish Radio Big Band)
Curtis Stigers (Concord)
 by Andrew Vélez

After a brief flirtation with pop and rock when he made his recording debut in 1991, blue-eyed soul singer, tenor saxophonist, guitarist and songwriter Curtis Stigers turned seriously to jazz. That he could have had a successful pop career was evinced by his performances with Elton John, Prince and Joe Cocker among others as well as his worldwide hit singles

including “I Wonder Why”.

But Stigers' main mentor in his home area of Boise, Idaho was legendary soul-jazz pianist Gene Harris and jazz was what the young Stigers really wanted to play. His formative years began with playing clarinet and then saxophone. With a fascinating voice that mixes traces of Mose Allison and Willie Nelson with hints of Tony Bennett, Stigers blends a rough-edged warmth with crisp, delicate enunciation and an occasional easy way with scatting.

Last year marked the 50th anniversary of the release of Frank Sinatra's live album, *Sinatra at the Sands* with the Count Basie Orchestra, arranged and conducted by Quincy Jones. Now daringly here comes Stigers with *One More For The Road*, a live recording with the Danish Radio Big Band saluting that classic 1966 set. All but two of the songs included were on that set. The result is a solidly hot swinging session that manages to celebrate the great singer and band while totally eschewing even a hint of shallow imitation. Using mostly original classic orchestrations of Nelson Riddle and Billy May, the classically trained Danish musicians make a remarkably easy fit into the world of a knockout big band.

Unfortunately the musicians are not identified but note must be made of the empathetic pianist backing Stigers up, notably on the title track. Here and throughout the singing has the spirit of Sinatra's swinging heat and his ability to reach into the heart of a song. Like Sinatra, Stigers has an easy manner with an audience and he is a great storyteller. He just also may deservedly have the breakout album of his career with this one.

For more information, visit concordmusicgroup.com. Stigers is at Birdland May 9th-13th. See Calendar.

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