



There are many typical duo configurations – piano and bass, piano and guitar, guitar and bass – and many outstanding duo recordings in the jazz archives, but the joining of Jim Hall on guitar and Bob Brookmeyer on valve trombone is far from typical.

The challenges of performing in a jazz duo ensemble are tremendous, and the exposure is absolute — there's simply nowhere to hide. But that doesn't seem to bother these two, and they don't try to make it easy on themselves either. Sometimes duo partners do little more than accompany or comp for one another while swapping endless solos. Not Jim and Bob. Instead, in the true spirit of ensemble playing, both are equal partners in producing the music. They work together to lay down the melody, fill out the harmonies, and keep the rhythm, all the while applying their improvisational magic that makes it jazz.

This particular performance was recorded live in 1979 at the North Sea Jazz Festival; it was part of a three-week European tour. Bob and Jim first worked together as a duo in 1978, just

one year earlier, but their first collaborative experience together came twenty years before that, when Jim and Bob were both members of the Jimmy Giuffre Trio. “Giuffre’s idea was to have three linear instruments improvise collectively,” recalls Jim. “He believed it didn’t make any difference whether or not the group had bass or drums. He said the instruments should be able to keep time themselves. It was damn hard, but it was one of the most enlarging experiences I’ve had.” Despite that early experience, Bob says, “When we first had the idea of playing duo together, we were not at all sure that it would work. We played and rehearsed together a lot, trying out different ideas. We just didn't know how we would keep the feeling of time going. What we rediscovered was that the constant repetition of meter was not necessary. Jim could decorate the time while I played, and then I could play in back of him.”

On this disc Challenge Records presents more than seventy minutes of their concert at The Hague, and this — something of a time capsule — is all that remains of their initial collaboration efforts. Both artists agree that this is a good representation of what they sounded like then, “then” being the operative word. The true nature of jazz is one of continuous evolution and both artists have continued to forge new directions in the intervening years. Nevertheless, the music they made twenty years ago still stands strong; and passing the test of time is, after all, one of the true indicators of a “classic.”

The affinity of these two creators allows them to conspire and to compose with humor that will tickle your ears and warmth that will touch your heart. Both artists were conservatory trained (Bob at the Kansas City Conservatory and Jim at the Cleveland Institute of Music), and today both are known as composers and orchestrators as well as jazz innovators. Perhaps that begins to explain their musical kinship. They also share a mutual belief that even more important than being a virtuoso performer is the ability to listen and react to one another, and this enables them to join together in weaving a tapestry that is rich in aural colors and textures.

Both players turn in stellar performances, performances that are devoid of the kind of virtuosic pyrotechnics that some musicians use as a substitute for real artistry. Here, there is a simplicity and a clarity of thought and sound that can be heard as Bob and Jim go about the task of unraveling and reassembling one well-constructed composition after another. According to Jim, “Simplicity and clarity give the listener an opportunity to get into what you're doing; time to reflect and react. It's especially important to duo players too. With two lines, each part is half of the texture.”

Most jazz standards survive from era to era because they are beautifully constructed songs, and a song with terrific architecture opens infinite opportunities for musical exploration. Tune after tune, Jim and Bob avoid the usual clichés, drawing instead on their compositional skills. Bob feels that “the great virtue of standards is that they give everyone a yardstick by which to measure what the improviser is doing. It's a vehicle. You choose a standard to show 'here's what I can do with that.’”

Skating in Central Park opens with lilting, warm tones and gentle rhythms. Some may remember this tune from a movie called “Odds Against Tomorrow” starring Harry Belafonte; Jim does because he played on the soundtrack. Here, Bob states the melody and then for several choruses he takes off on a sweet and melodic journey to parts unknown. Jim follows with his improvisation, subtly altering the form by returning early to the bridge. Toward the end of Jim’s solo excursion Bob spontaneously joins in adding a playful counter line, and this is just a taste of the interplay that is to come on later tracks.

Curiosity is aroused from the opening trills of the second selection; first wondering what tune those trills might herald, then wondering how much Bach might have influenced this rendition of **I Hear A Rhapsody**. When both lines get moving in simultaneous and spontaneous composition, this song becomes something akin to an original two-part invention.

Jim plays hide-and-seek with the melody in the introduction to **My Funny Valentine**, providing just enough for the listener to recognize the tune. Bob takes the first solo and totally eschews the melody. Then, building on the intensity of Bob's solo, Jim turns the melody inside out in a solo that starts as intensely chordal and rhythmic and suddenly breaks into a single line improvisation. At the end the melody reemerges, gently reminding the listener that this particular journey is over.

Bob begins the fourth track, **Body and Soul**, by stating the melody and then embarking on a prolonged voyage. This longer track gives both players plenty of room to stretch out and travel a farther afield. With an interesting bridge that moves up a half step from the original key, Jim says “Body and Soul always has surprises in store.” And after taking many twists and turns, this decidedly upbeat treatment ends up like it started out – with a trill.

Every standard song has some history, within the jazz world-at-large, as well as for each individual player and listener. Musicians and jazz aficionados often think of Coleman Hawkins when they hear **Body and Soul**, and **In A Sentimental Mood** is most often associated with Billy Strayhorn and Duke Ellington’s magical band. Once again Jim and Bob take a standard and make it their own, ending their moodscape with a gentle reminder of the melody.

The sixth selection, **Sweet Basil**, is named for the New York City nightclub where they played their first duo engagement. Jim opens, setting the rhythm, then Bob takes over laying down a simple line that becomes the point of departure for this Hall/Brookmeyer original. Composed on the spot, this tune has a pulsing, driving rhythm that propels the players and listeners alike.

Both Jim and Bob tease out just enough of the melody for the listener to recognize **Darn That Dream**. Throughout this mellow rendition, they continue to throw out melodic hints, like so many breadcrumbs leading the way home.

The last selection, **St. Thomas**, is a study in exuberant exploration. Together this duo stretches this popular Sonny Rollins tune far beyond the island boundaries, evoking shades of a Spanish bullfight and the feel of a Texas two-step.

Bob Brookmeyer and Jim Hall share a rare and enduring musical relationship. For more than forty years their musical paths have continued to cross. Bob Brookmeyer composed a symphonic piece featuring guitar which Jim performed with the Stockholm Radio Symphony in 1984. And in the early 1990s Jim asked Bob to play a couple of duets with him at the Jim Hall Invitational, a concert that was recorded live at Town Hall in New York City. Luckily, some of these performances, like this one at the North Sea Jazz Festival, were recorded for future listeners.

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