Hallmarks: The Best of Jim Hall

A hallmark is a distinguishing feature or characteristic, but the word also carries with it connotations of high quality, purity, excellence—the proverbial stamp of approval on works that meet the highest of standards. Jim Hall's career has garnered him many such laudatory endorsements from around the world including the Danish Jazzpar Prize, America's Jazz Master Fellowship bestowed by National Endowment for the Arts, and most recently Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (Knight in the Order of Arts and Letters) granted by the French Minister of Culture and Communication.

What are those distinguishing features that have earned Jim Hall such critical and popular acclaim? Some will point to his sense of space, the art of quiet understatement; others will speak of his highly attuned melodic and harmonic sense; and more than a few will highlight his quest for the unpredictable and his willingness to take creative risks. All would be correct.

Jim Hall doesn't care much for clichés or hackneyed expressions—musical or verbal. He is not one to spend much time looking back, nor is he prone to repetition as evidenced by this collection of recordings spanning 30 years. Whether recorded live or in-studio, all of his performances are full of surprises.

While some artists make full use of the studio facilities to work and rework their recordings until perfected for posterity, Hall prefers the immediacy and realism of recording live. He loves his audiences, being in touch with them, reacting to and with them, including them. He prefers realism, even with an occasional wart.

Of the seven selections here which were recorded live, two are quartet performances and five are duets. As is befitting of their prolific collaborations and the stir they caused in the 1970s and early 1980s, three of those live duets (all on disc one) are with Ron Carter, each recorded in a different locale in a different year. "Autumn Leaves"—recorded in 1972 at The Playboy Club in New York City, "a bizarre venue" to Hall's recollection—is a flawlessly fashioned example of how a little says a lot. Once Hall states the melody, these two masters explore together, neither playing the expected notes yet each feeling, hearing, and anticipating the other. In "Down from Antigua," recorded ten years later at The Village West, a small nightclub in New York's Greenwich Village, you can hear evidence of Hall's early explorations with "equipment." Hall says he used a Chorus foot pedal to "put a different frame on things." Accoutrements notwithstanding, "a different frame" is always provided by the cerebral musical imaginings. If you ever supposed that two improvisers might run out of things to say to one another, particularly when the subject is an often-played tune, listen to "Alone Together" recorded live at the Concord Jazz Festival and perish the thought. Of course Hall is also much noted for his duo work with pianists, and the two tracks here, one live at the Village Vanguard with Kenny Barron, and the other recorded in the studio with George Shearing are two exquisite and very different examples of Hall's collaborative prowess. Lush is a word usually reserved for orchestras with

strings, but on this poignant rendition of "Emily," with a particularly mellifluous solo by Shearing, these two giants achieve that fullness of sound with just the two of them. The duet with Kenny Barron recorded live at the Village Vanguard proffers that same fullness of sound achieved by one who makes use of a full keyboard, but the energy level is different and you can feel the audience's influence as Hall and Barron wind through several different keys on the 16-bar tune titled "Something to Wish For."

By virtue of both Hall's creativity and longevity, he has influenced many of today's younger players . . . and they have influenced him, fueling his drive to stretch beyond that which is easy and expected. The tracks with Greg Osby, Pat Metheny, and Mike Stern, three gentlemen born in years during which Hall was already gaining national attention, prove the point. All three tunes are Hall originals intended to break boundaries and forge new paths. Hall was thinking of Ornette Coleman-esque lines when he wrote "Furnished Flats" for a live recording at the Village Vanguard. It's a playful blues in five flats, a key that calls for Osby to reach down to the lowest note on his horn. "Cold Spring" (named not for the weather but for a Hudson Valley town), recorded live at the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild in Pittsburgh, is an improvisation based on "Heigh Ho, Nobody Home," a folk round that is both the point of departure and return for Hall and Metheny. And "Stern Stuff" is an uptempo contemporary romp that evokes an image of children running circles around one another. Written specifically for the studio date with Mike Stern, Hall describes it as "straight ahead with a Thelonious Monk feeling."

Listening to everyone around him, stretching his ears, this is how Jim Hall stays young. But youth does not have the lock on everything. Influences from the days of yore still remain in Hall's heart and he pays tribute to them in varying ways. "Poor Butterfly," one of the two solo tracks on this compilation, is a song Hall first heard played by Charlie Christian with Benny Goodman's Orchestra. Hall remembers that rendition these many years later and said he tried out some chords he heard George Shearing once use. Another Charlie Christian with Benny Goodman track that Hall remembers is "Grand Slam," so that's the name he gave his quartet featuring Joe Lovano, George Mraz and Lewis Nash. With a tip of the hat to Sonny Rollins who introduced him to Calypso sounds, Hall penned an original for Grand Slam on the day of the recording—"Say Hello to Calypso" is an island party that actually took place at the Regattabar in Boston, and were it not for the slightest string twang that gives away Hall's use of a pedal to affect the sound of steel drums, you might think you were in St. Thomas. The Calypso beat is laid-back compared to the high-energy combustion of "All of a Sudden My Heart Sings." With Don Thompson on piano, Rufus Reid on bass, and Terry Clarke on drums, this hard-swinging "standard" from the 1945 film *Anchors Aweigh* is guaranteed to make you want to dance. The other most stellar standard in this compilation, also taken at an up-beat tempo, is "All the Things You Are." Throughout the years Hall has played this song often, in all sorts of configurations and grooves, and he always dedicates it to his wife, Jane, because it is her all-time favorite song. This trio track from the mid- 1980s features bassist Steve LaSpina and drummer Akira Tana backing Hall's dissection and reinvention of Jerome Kern's perfectly formed and beautifully constructed song. Perhaps influenced by his time as a member of Jimmy Giuffre's saxophone, trombone, and guitar trio, or maybe just because he's an explorer at heart, Hall has continuously experimented with unusual musical combinations. New sounds intrigue him, and when one day Gil Goldstein played a few bars on his bass accordion, over the phone, Hall couldn't resist writing a tune for it. And not just any tune—a jazz duet for guitar and accordion. Although

“Snowbound” is named for a storm that prevented producer John Snyder from getting to the studio (Jane Hall wore the producer’s hat that day), the tune is evocative of a cold winter day, opening with bass accordion lines as deep and dark as a snow drift that are soon counter balanced by light guitar snowflakes, dissonances that resolve slowly, and about halfway through the snow starts to melt.

Another unusual ensemble is heard on “Quadrologue,” a plucky, percussive, four-way conversation between guitar, viola, cello, and bass. The guitar and bass (played by Scott Colley) occasionally speak in unison, as do the cello and viola played by Louise Schulman and Myron Lutzke, respectively. But typical of most discussions, the voices most often weave in and out, over and under. Hall’s score provides some freedom of choice for the players as certain sections are left open for improvised pizzicato or the random selection of existing motifs. Schulman is also featured on “October Song.” This somewhat British sounding (à la Vaughan Williams), ruminative portrait of fall moods painted solely by Hall with a 12-piece viola and cello string section, opens with a single melody line on guitar that mirrors the dawning of a cloudless October day.

Foreign cultures and their indigenous music have also influenced Hall’s musical sensibilities and perhaps none more so than the music of Brazil. By 1971, when Hall recorded “Simple Samba,” the opening track on disc one, American jazz musicians were embracing the Brazilian harmonies and rhythms. Airto Moreira was new on the scene and his influence is clearly felt from the opening note. The opening track on disc two is dedicated to Gilberto. Here Hall again achieves a reflective quality with his solo rendition of “João,” weaving pure single lines of thought and feeling over his own harmonic and rhythmic selfaccompaniment. Hall first heard “Beija-Flor” on a recording by Brazilian vocalist Beth Carvalho. The title means “kiss the flower” and the haunting plaintive melody rendered by a quartet featuring Gil Goldstein, Steve LaSpina, and Terry Clarke achieves the feeling of an orchestral movie score. Hall interprets the song as a tango and adds an interlude between solos that he recalls was inspired by Bob Brookmeyer.

Hall originally wrote “All Across the City” for a 1972 recording date with fellow guitarist Jimmy Raney and saxophonist Zoot Sims (“Two Jims and Zoot,” backed by Osie Johnson on drums and Steve Swallow on bass), but here, 17 years later, assisted by Goldstein, LaSpina, and Clarke, Hall delivers a much different, dreamier, more ethereal morning in New York. From the opening twang in “Simple Samba” to the closing notes of “Bent Blue,” a duet with Christian McBride for which they had not rehearsed but during which Hall says “they had a real groove going,” you can hear the “hallmarks” that define Jim Hall’s artistry. The title of this compilation is more than just a clever play on words, it depicts his very essence. Whether recording live or in the studio, feeling ruminative or frisky, lyrical or percussive, playing in a style that some might define as classic or pushing the boundaries, Jim Hall is one of the most forward thinking musicians of our time.

—Devra Hall

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