

Mark Elf Trio Live at Smalls

Published in JazzImprov, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2001)

Mark Elf Trio Live at Smalls

Recorded: October 20 + 21, 1995. Released: September 12, 2000. Jen Bay Jazz

Repertoire: Quick Silver, 109 West, 52nd St. Theme, It Was Written In The Stars, Stella By Starlight, Too Close For Comfort, The Theme, 109 West.

Personnel: Mark Elf, guitar; Neal Miner, bass; Joe Strausser, drums.

Where's the fire? At Smalls, a smoky jazz joint in New York's Greenwich Village, where the Mark Elf Trio fanned the flames for two days back in 1995. Released last fall, Live At Smalls has now become Elf's sixth consecutive release to land in the top spot on the Gavin Jazz Chart.

Today's audiences demand virtuosity and sizzle – Elf delivers! Sparks fly from the first note to the last. I've never heard quite so many notes packed into a single CD. Because it was recorded live and left unedited, most of the tracks are long enough to allow all three musicians room for expansive solos, opportunity put to excellent use by bassist Neal Miner, and drummer Joe Strausser.

Turned jazz pro more than 30 years ago, Elf paid dues on the stand and in the studio with Lou Donaldson, Benny Golson, Freddie Hubbard, Groove Holmes, the Heath Brothers, to name a few. He remains a hardcore bop player, true to the extreme tempos and single-line solos that characterize that genre. Not everyone appreciates bebop. Louis Armstrong has been quoted as saying "It's all just flash. It doesn't come from the heart." But while this CD admittedly contains much flash, there is also a lot of heart.

The opening track, Quick Silver, erupts at lightening speed and ends as abruptly as it begins. Beyond the applause expected on a live recording, Strausser's drum solo elicited the first of several encouraging and appreciative audience outbursts.

Nearly one third of this disc is devoted to two versions of 109 West, an Elf original inspired by the purchase of his home. Taken at a moderate tempo, the trio slips easily into a swinging groove. Then the fire flares up again with 52nd St Theme as the trio gets back to a lightning-fast tempo that is soon extinguished by a quick, clean, ending.

Impressed but overwhelmed, my ears prefer the ballad and slower-tempo tracks that are laced with more chordal work, quarter notes, and listening space. Elf's sense of harmony is sometimes hidden beneath the torrent of notes that seem to flow so effortlessly from his fingers, but his sensibilities are front and center on the next two tunes, It Was Written In The Stars and Stella By Starlight.

Elf's liner notes explain that this rendition of Too Close For Comfort was inspired by a TV appearance of Ella Fitzgerald backed by a big band led by Quincy Jones. I don't know what inspired Miner's bass solo on this track, but I particularly enjoyed his game of hide-and-seek with the melody.

The last track on the CD is the second version of 109 West, but the last tune of the live set was most likely The Theme, an up-tempo romp made famous by Art Blakey and favored by many jazz artists, including Elf, as a set-closer.

I admit that while listening to this recording there were times when I felt as if the fire was consuming every last bit of oxygen. But no matter how much Elf fans the flames with his pyrotechnique, his blistering bop solos are inspired and this CD burns with his passion.