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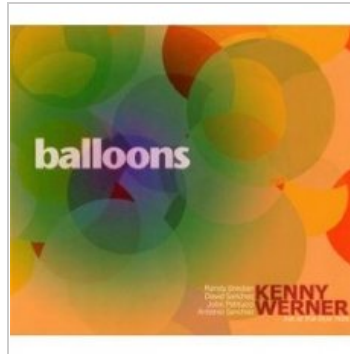
Kenny Werner: Four by Five Live at the Blue Note



April 04, 2011

Balloons

Music	
Sound	
Artist	Kenny Werner
Label	Half Note Records
Time	53:42
Year	2011



I can pretty much sum up Kenny Werner's *Balloons* by quoting the last two words of Bill Milkowski's liner notes: "inspired evening."

I love live recordings, particularly those done in clubs rather than concert halls. Okay. Carnegie Hall is an exception. There's something special about the sonic reality of that place that comes through on recordings in a way that enhances the music and energizes the musicians.

In the present case, it's not the Blue Note acoustics that energize Werner and his cohorts, but the attentive and responsive audience and the New York club vibe that the Blue Note exemplifies.

This was a quieter night than some. The music tends toward the rhapsodic rather than the rambunctious. There are just four pieces on the CD. Werner wrote them all and the musicians take full advantage of his generous servings of space and time (which may be the same thing) as they develop both the structured sections and their improvisations.

The band is what used to be considered the classic jazz quintet lineup of trumpet, tenor, and rhythm. Kenny Werner's at the piano, of course. The bassist and drummer are John Patitucci and Antonio Sanchez. Out front are Randy Brecker and David Sanchez on trumpet and sax respectively. The compositions and performances have a much more orchestral quality than one would expect from such a basic quintet. I'm thinking back to try to come up with parallels and the one that comes to mind is the early Jazz Messengers quintets for which Horace Silver and Hank Mobley wrote highly explorative, evocative, and expansive charts.

In the credit where due section, everybody here qualifies. I'm going to start with Randy Brecker. I have to admit to not having kept a close ear on what he's been doing for the past few years. Obviously it's time to start paying more attention. He plays here with precision, clarity, and creativity that make one want to hear more and more of what Brecker's up to these days.

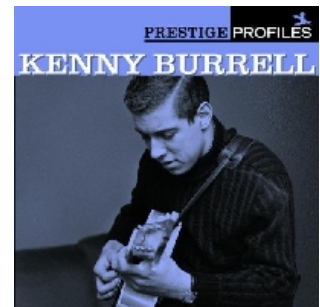
David Sanchez has a marvelous tenor sax presence. His work here, particularly on his long "Saba" solo, covers an amazing range from Getz-like lyricism to Trane-like explosiveness but always in his own voice with total naturalness and authenticity.

I hope it's okay to credit bassist Patitucci and drummer Sanchez together. That is, after all, how they work. Each dances on his respective instrument, playing with the beat and the time, defining them, developing them, deconstructing and reconstructing them. They do it in ideal synchronicity, always attentive to the needs of the group, the soloist, and the composition.

And that brings us to Kenny Werner, the leader, the pianist, and the composer of the four works on *Balloon*. Werner's compositions here, as implied above, are well structured and for them most part relaxed. The closer, "Class Dismissed," is the punchiest of the set with space provided for a four minute tension-releasing drum solo by Sanchez. That piece, Werner says is the yang to the yin of the slower thoughtfulness of the opening "Saba," which features a closing call and response improvisation by Brecker and David Sanchez. In between are

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the lyrical "Siena" and the centerpiece of the date, "Balloons." That one starts with a superb piano solo introduction by Werner that sounds like it should never end but of course does as the horns take up the childlike hop-scotch main theme. It's a great piece.

Now for a few words about the sound on the recording. It's really fine, but it's not like some live dates. It's very up close and personal. It puts the musicians in your listening space rather than putting you in the Blue Note. The audience applause (and thus any extraneous audience noise that might have been there) is subdued and distant. I'm very comfortable with that. In fact, I've very happy with that. Steve Remote and Aura Sonic made all the right choices, as far as I'm concerned.

To complete the circle, here's another quote from the liner notes. It's Kenny Werner talking about the opening and closing tunes on the CD: "One was written from the head and the other was written from the heart. And I totally enjoy both sides." I do, too.
