

The American Rag

America's Only Traditional Jazz and Ragtime Newspaper

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Choice Cuts

Titan Hot Seven, At Home With The Titan Hot Seven, Titan Hot Seven Records; 14 Selections, TT = 66:39; Titan Hot Seven, Linger Awhile, Titan Hot Seven Records; 12 Selections, TT = 1:12

Two Titan Hot Seven albums doubles your listening pleasure, that's a sure thing. You may say a TH7 studio recording is hot stuff but it'll never match a live performance with you in the front row.

I can't agree. True, the Titans are fun to watch but they often are their own worst enemies because their off-the-wall schtick detracts from their terrific music making skills. And it always bothers me when the sizzle seems more important than the steak.

The two discs under the magnifying glass were recorded a year apart – “At Home” in 2006 when Chuck Bond was still blowing a mean cornet for the Titans – and “Linger Awhile” in 2007 when trumpeter and flugelhornist Flip Oakes brought his remarkable range and disciplined approach to the TH7 front line.

Neither of the discs was released immediately, but now that they're available they add to the depth and attractiveness of TH7 discs now in the market place.

The '06 entry proves that the old saw about too many chefs spoiling the soup doesn't necessarily hold water, not water nor soup. Rather than have just one of the Seven responsible for the program, each of the ensemble brought in one or more songs and the result is a delightful mix of swingers, slow-downers, and those that fall in between.

One of the tweeners opens the proceedings, unexpectedly a theme from the TV comedy, “The Munsters,” followed by a leisurely and lovely take of “I'll See You In My Dreams,” which you may have heard played by guitarist Howard Alden in the flick, “Sweet and Lowdown.” It takes the following two tracks, a French entry (“Ce Monsieur Quir Parle”) brought to the band by trombonist Jim Fryer and “High Society” to realize almost anything goes on the recording.

Highlights include a medium tempo take of a raggedy “Tiger Rag;” another Fryer favorite, “Seattle,” penned by the late Dave Pinardi who introduced the haunting “Water From An Ancient Well” to the festival circuit; “Beyond The Sea,” with Draga leading the charge, and the tongue-in-cheekish “Ham and Eggs” that marks Draga's debut as a vocalist. (Tony Bennett doesn't have a thing to worry about.)

The “Linger Awhile” recording is simply another grand outing by a group of musicians that is tightly knit without being tightly wound. They simply do what comes naturally – everyone of them: pianist Jeff Barnhart, guitarist Jerry Krahn, bassist Ike Harris, impish drummer Danny Coots and the previously mentioned Fryer and Draga.

Like the “At Home” disc, “Linger Awhile” offers a nice balance of hand-holders and hot-hoofers to say nothing of a few tunes that generally do not show up on festival bands' play lists.

The latter includes a perfect reading by Krahn, Oakes and Barnhart of the warm ballad “Emily.”

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However, “Mona Lisa,” the Nat Cole vocal hit, is turned into an instrumental romp ala Louis Prima.

Along more conventional lines, there's a solid Fryer vocal on “Beale Street Blues” that Draga keeps in a Dixie groove until Krahn does his twangy-blues thing only to have Harris and Barnhart return it to trad-land. And Krahn and Draga light a fire under “Big Bear Stomp” before Fryer and the others add fuel to the performance of the old fave that ends in a blazing finish.

Coincidental or planned, I'm not sure, but the band takes two ventures into sleepy-by land with a mild and mellow version of “When I Grow To Old To Dream” that finds Barnhart handling the lyrics and “When My Dreamboat Comes Home” with a decidedly different approach – a banjo rhythm, a second line feeling and inclusion of a seldom heard verse.

For sheer beauty though, my vote goes to “Pete Kelly's Blues” on which Oakes, others on the front line and Barnhart weave a seamless blend of horns and piano. And for a different reason, spirit and energy, the choice is “There'll Be Some Changes” that again demonstrates why Coots is one of the most tasteful timekeepers around simply because he listens and then supplies the just right accents.

GRADES: At Home With The Titan Hot Seven – A+; Linger Awhile – A+
(For orders: Coots@juno.com)

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