Bill Frisell - Beautiful Dreamers (2010)

Written by bluesever
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1. Love Sick 1:04 2. Winslow Homer 3:32 3. Beautiful Dreamer 3:02 4. A Worthy Endeavor (for Cajori) 5:25 5. It's Nobody's Fault But Mine 4:34 6. Baby Cry 6:21 7. Benny's Bugle 3:31 8. Tea For Two 4:28 9. No Time To Cry 1:36 10. Better Than A Machine (For Vic Chestnutt) 2:49 11. Goin' Out Of My Head 2:47 12. Worried Woman 4:44 13. Keep On The Sunny Side 2:26 14. Sweetie 4:28 15. All We Can Do 6:16 16. Who Was That Girl? 6:16   Bill Frisell - guitar Eyvind Kang - viola Rudy Royston – drums

Most people slow down as they get older but, in the case of musicians, there are those who seem to actually step up the pace. Bill Frisell may be approaching 60, but he's busier than ever—so much so, in fact, that the intrepid guitarist has left his record label of over twenty years (Nonesuch), because it was unprepared to keep up with his need to release more than one album per year. Beautiful Dreamers is Frisell's first Savoy Jazz release but it won't be the last, as the intrepid guitarist heads into the studio in October with his string-driven 858 Quartet, to record a follow-up to Richter 858 (Songlines, 2005), for release early in 2011.

Those who caught Frisell during the 2010 summer festival season—including TD Ottawa International Jazz Festival and Norway's Kongsberg Jazz Festival)—will be familiar with the joyful interaction of his Beautiful Dreamers trio, but there's at least one significant difference between its live shows and self-titled debut. In performance, both Frisell and longtime musical cohort/violist Eyvind Kang use a bevy of effects—distortion, pitch shifting, looping and more—to expand the range of an unorthodox trio that also includes drummer Rudy Royston. The disc, on the other hand, is a largely unprocessed affair, though Frisell does use an octave divider on the quirky "Homer Blues," and some dense overdrive on the near-rocking "Dec. 25th," where Royston's go-go beat propels what was, in concert, a lengthy highlight, but is, here, an almost too-short miniature.

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Almost, that is. Like other recent discs including Disfarmer (Nonesuch, 2009) and History, Mystery (Nonesuch, 2008), few of Beautiful Dreamers' racks crack the six-minute mark. But Beautiful Dreamers clearly understands the difference between live performance and permanent documentation; none of the material overstays its welcome, but neither does it appear hurried, as Frisell and Kang orbit around each other with brooding introspection on "T5 Pt. 1," a spare extension of Where in the World? (Nonesuch, 1991)—or, even better, one of Frisell's early high watermarks, This Land (Nonesuch, 1994).

Beautiful Dreamers deserts the overt Americana of Good Dog, Happy Man (Nonesuch, 1999), yet there's still something indefinably American about the guitarist's writing, which accounts for ten of the disc's sixteen tracks. His covers traverse a broad terrain of distinctly American music, ranging from the visceral blues of Blind Willie Johnson's "Nobody's Fault" and Benny Goodman's swinging "Benny's Bugle" (where Royston channels Gene Krupa, but without the bluster and bombast), to a wry take on the Little Anthony and the Imperials hit, "Goin' Out of My Head" (Kang's pizzicato the melodic front line), and the iconic title track, which coalesces from the ether, its familiar theme only emerging at the song's end.

In the most understated way possible, Beautiful Dreamers' special intimacy, quiet joy and constant sound of surprise represent a shift in Frisell's music. Moving away from project specificity and, instead, towards a consolidation of the guitarist's multifaceted interests, it's a beautiful way, indeed, to kick-start this relationship with a new label. ---John Kelman, allaboutjazz.com

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