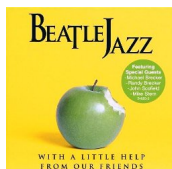


BeatleJazz - With A Little Help From Our Friends (2005)

Written by bluesever

Friday, 11 November 2011 09:49 - Last Updated Thursday, 10 January 2013 15:32

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1. *Yes It Is* 2. *Piggies* 3. *Imagine* 4. *Strawberry Fields Forever* [play](#) 5. *I Will* 6. *Working Class Hero* 7. *Hard Day's Night, A* 8. *Across the Universe* 9. *Lovely Rita* 10. *And I Love Her* 11. *End, The* [play](#) 12. *Chains*

Personnel: Dave Kikoski – piano, synthesizer Brian Melvin – drums, tabla Larry Grenadier – bass instrument Boris Koslov – bass instrument Mike Stern – guitar John Scofield – guitar Michael Brecker – saxophone Randy Brecker – trumpet

Let me be the first to admit that I am prejudiced against jazz musicians covering the Beatles. This is in no way related to the source material: like all sentient mammals on the Planet Earth, I adore pretty much every note the Fabs recorded. It's just that their material is so weighted with cultural and nostalgic baggage that (unlike standards like, say, "All the Things You Are") it retains too much of its Beatleness to be just a set of chords: it's them. Or it's us—Abbey Road and Revolver have inhabited our collections so long that they're intertwined in our lives.

It only took Dave Kikoski's gorgeous piano intro and Brian Melvin's hypnotic tabla pattern on "Yes It Is," the opening track of BeatleJazz's third CD, *With a Little Help From Our Friends*, to confound my cynical expectations. BeatleJazz is composed of Melvin on drums and tablas, Kikoski on piano and synth, and Larry Grenadier on bass. The core group is augmented by the "friends of the CD's title: John Scofield and Mike Stern on guitar; Mike and Randy Brecker on tenor sax and trumpet, respectively; and on four tracks, Boris Koslov substituted on bass. The results are for the most part delightful. Many jazz-covers-rock albums allow the musicians to sleepwalk through bland, jazz-lite arrangements, content to let the familiarity of the material sell the product. Not here: the performances teem with deep concentration and the arrangements are imaginative and very, very smart.

For example, "Strawberry Fields Forever" sheds the baroque studio experimentation of the 1967

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single but is otherwise played straight. Kikoski's piano does the melodic heavy lifting, and when the group plays the coda (Grenadier's bowed bass taking the place of the groaning strings of the original), one is struck dumb by how wonderful, how novel that section of the song is. The lack of harmonic development on John Lennon's solo rant "Working Class Hero is dealt with by going pedal-point: Mike Brecker and Kikoski channel Coltrane and McCoy Tyner, respectively, and remake the song as a searching, beseechingly modal ten-minute prayer.

Not everything is that wonderful. Randy Brecker and Kikoski do their best on Lennon's "Imagine, and very nearly pull it off—not surprisingly, as a ballad—but here the song is just too intractable. Even though it's a solo Lennon composition, its utopian sentiment makes it the most Beatle number here in the way it signifies so much more than its words or melody. Brecker's playing that melody so faithfully, right down to the two notes of Lennon's vocal "you-hoo, doesn't help. On the other hand, John Scofield absolutely nails "I Will ; this Paul McCartney number's chords lend themselves well to jazz and Sco's solo is the best he's done in some time—sweet, spacious, and wise.

It's a tribute to the quality of this album that my unfortunate bigotries could be so thwarted. Too bad BeatleJazz can't immediately do another CD: I'm eager to hear their versions of "All Things Must Pass and "She Said She Said. ---Paul Olson, allaboutjazz.com

Drummer Brian Melvin and pianist Dave Kikoski probably know every Beatles nuance in the book. So it's surprising With a Little Help From Our Friends, their third set of Fab Four interpretations largely ignores the originals' charms.

The first two Beatlejazz discs kept the group to a piano trio. This time, in addition to bassists Larry Grenadier and Boris Koslov replacing Charles Fambrough, the jazz fabs invited along Michael and Randy Brecker as well as guitarists John Scofield and Mike Stern. With saxophonist Michael Brecker, the group casts John Lennon's angry "Working Class Hero" in an early-'60s John Coltrane mold. The simple melody works well here, first with the trio playing rubato underneath it and later as a vamp that holds its own for 11 minutes. Lennon's "Imagine" becomes a warm ballad with Randy Brecker's muted trumpet.

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But the actual Beatles songs sound as if the band opened a fake book and read the notes off the page, instead of learning them from the records. With all the extra color that the original "Strawberry Fields Forever" gained from strings, brass and lead guitar, the group plays a by-the-numbers version, save for a few odd chord substitutions. "I Will" and "Across the Universe" sound like staid, cocktail hour jazz. Only "Yes It Is" takes risks. Here, Melvin plays tablas and the group states the melody slowly after starting in a Latin-type groove. --- Mike Shanley, jazztimes.com

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