Modern Jazz Quartet – Django (1955)

1.Django 2.One bass hit 3.La ronde suite 4.The queens fancy 5.Delaunays dilemma 6.Autumn in New York 7.But not for me 8.Milano Kenny Clarke - Drums Percy Heath - Bass Milt Jackson - Vibraphone John Lewis - Piano

Hailing from a trio of Modern Jazz Quartet (MJQ) sessions, Django (1955) contains some of the earliest sides that Milt Jackson (vibraphone), John Lewis (piano), Percy Heath (bass) and Kenny Clarke (drums) recorded for Prestige Records. Initially, the combo was part of Dizzy Gillespie's influential backing band and after a change in drummers (to Connie Kay), they continued as one of the more sophisticated aggregates of the post-bop era. The album commences with Lewis' sublime and serene title track "Django," dedicated to the memory of guitarist extraordinaire Django Reinhardt. This musical paean aptly recaptures the essence of Reinhardt's enigmatic gypsy-like nature, especially evident within Jackson's leads, which emerge from the thoughtful opening dirge with a refined, warm tone throughout. Reinhardt's playfulness is recalled in Lewis' well-placed interjections between and beneath Jackson's lines. "One Bass Hit" is an homage to Gillespie with Heath taking charge of the intricate melody, showing off his often criminally underutilized skills. From the same December 1954 gathering comes the moody Lewis-penned ballad "Milano." There is a notable Mediterranean feel resounding in the opulence of MJQ's unassuming interaction. The centerpiece is the lengthy four-movement showcase "La Ronde Suite" circa January of 1955. The MJQ maneuver with unquestionable grace, alternately supporting and soloing, each taking the reigns as the others construct their contributions around the respective soloist. The remaining four selections date back to June of 1953 and are highlighted by "The Queen's Fancy," a simple and refined fugue that carries a distinct air of nobility. "Delaunay's Dilemma" is a definite contrast as it allows the players to cut loose with some frisky and fun exchanges that perfectly demonstrate their ability to glide through the sinuous syncopation. Both the understated splendor of "Autumn in New York" and the equally sublime cover of "But Not for Me" provide some familiar backdrops for the MJQ to collaborate and perhaps more directly display their essential improvisational abilities. In terms of seminal Modern Jazz Quartet entries, it is hard to exceed the variety of styles and performances gathered on Django. ---Lindsay Planer, Rovi

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