

Kenny Wheeler - Songs for Quintet (2015)

Written by bluesever

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1 *Seventy-Six* 5:02 2 *Jigsaw* 8:44 3 *The Long Waiting* 5:10 4 *Canter No. 1* 6:40 5 *Sly Eyes* 8:07 6 *1076* 2:40 7 *Old Time* 6:12 8 *Pretty Liddle Waltz* 6:49 9 *Nonetheless* 4:52
Kenny Wheeler – flugelhorn Stan Sulzmann - tenor saxophone John Parricelli – guitar Chris Laurence - double bass Martin France - drums

With the passing of Kenneth Vincent John Wheeler—Kenny Wheeler to his legion of friends and fans—the world lost yet another significant figure in the history of jazz from the mid-'60s through to the second decade of the new millennium, the artist that Norma Winstone (more often than not his singer of choice) called "the Duke Ellington of our times." While Wheeler had, since 2004, been releasing his music on the Italian Cam Jazz label, but it seems wholly appropriate that his final album—recorded in December, 2013, just nine months prior to his passing at the age of 84—has been issued on Munich's award-winning ECM Records.

Wheeler had released a number of fine albums prior to coming to the label in the mid-'70s (including his first, the recently reissued 1969 Fontana classic *Windmill Tilter*), but it was with ECM that he truly honed his skills as a composer and bandleader (his unparalleled acumen on both trumpet and flugelhorn already finely developed), first as a member of the groundbreaking Azimuth trio, with Winstone and keyboardist John Taylor, but subsequently as a leader in his own right with a stellar run of albums ranging from 1976's *Gnu High*, 1977's *Deer Wan* and 1980's *Around Six* to 1984's *Double, Double You*, 1990's *Music for Large & Small Ensembles* and 1997's *Angel Song*.

With *Songs for Quintet*, plenty has changed...but plenty has also remained the same. The quintet Wheeler has chosen for the December, 2013 date recorded at Abbey Road Studios in London—the infirmed Wheeler likely unable to travel much further to record in any of the studios usually chosen by ECM founder/producer Manfred Eicher and Steve Lake (who,

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uncharacteristically, are credited as co-producers)—is a set of friends, all of whom he's been recording with for decades with the exception of drummer Martin France. Still, France is no stranger to Wheeler and the trumpeter's circles, having been a member of John Taylor's trio since 2005 and appearing on the trumpeter's last two Cam Jazz recordings (2012's large ensemble *The Long Waiting* (2012) and 2013's appropriately titled sextet date *Six For Six*). France will also be no stranger to longtime label followers for his work in the unfairly overlooked group *First House* on 1985's *Eréndira* and 1989's *Cantilena*.

Saxophonist Stan Sulzmann goes back much further, playing on Wheeler albums ranging from the lower-profile *Kayak* (*Ah Um*, 1992) to the more internationally acclaimed *Music for Large & Small Ensemble*. John Parricelli—a busy session guitarist who shows up in the jazz world all-too-infrequently, and whose own *Alba* (*Provocateur*, 2000) is an album begging for a follow-up (and on which France appears as another example of the UK's close-knit jazz community)—first appeared on record with Wheeler on 1999's *A Long Time Ago* (the trumpeter's final recording for the label until now) but proved even more impressive on the expat Canadian trumpeter's *Dream Sequence* (*Psi*, 2003). Bassist Chris Laurence has been one of Wheeler's primary go-to bassists since *Kayak*, and whose own *New View* (*Basho*, 2007) not only featured Parricelli and France, but included a Wheeler tune, "Sly Eyes," which is reprised to great effect on *Songs for Quintet*.

And so, with a collection of musicians who have engaged and interacted both with the trumpeter (who sticks to the warmer, mellower flugelhorn here) and in other contexts, Wheeler had about as simpatico a quintet as he was likely to find, across a 52-minute set that features a number of previously performed compositions. The ambling ballad "The Long Waiting" was both the title track to the 2012 big band recording and featured on the more intimate *Six for Six*. The more eminently propulsive "Canter No. 1," representing some of *Songs for Quintet*'s fiercest moments while still remaining somehow gentle and restrained, was heard previously in multiple contexts: on Wheeler's Cam Jazz duo debut with John Taylor, *Where Do We Go From Here?* (2004); in a medley with "Old Ballad" on *Kayak*; on the atypical trio date with Taylor and electric bassist Steve Swallow, *One of Many* (Cam Jazz, 2011); and, finally, on *The Long Waiting*. The closing, particularly drum-driven "Nonetheless" debuted on 1995's *All the More* (Soul Note, 1997) before being reprised on one of Wheeler's particular career milestones, the chamber-like *Angel Song*, before ultimately reappearing just a few years later on *Dream Sequence*.

But even well-known, well-covered music assumes a life of its own on *Songs for Quintet*. Sulzmann covered "Jigsaw," the title track to his own transatlantic 2004 *Basho* album, but here it simmers with a different kind of heat, as Parricelli's chordal accompaniment creates even more ethereal atmospherics than the delicate support of *The Jigsaw*'s pianist, Marc Copland. "Sly Eyes," on the other hand, begins with a militaristic solo from France before assuming a tango-informed complexion, as Wheeler delivers a solo of careful consideration and inimitably

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focused construction.

A characteristic, in fact, that has defined Wheeler's playing throughout his sixty-year career. He may no longer be capable of hitting the signature stratospheric highs he once did so effortlessly, but his tone remains pure, his melancholic lyricism wholly intact. Wheeler has played with many a fine drummer in his career, but France ranks amongst his best, capable of the delicate colors required on the opening "Seventy Six" while driving the more energetic "Jigsaw" with a frenetic pulse punctuated with plenty of explosive punctuations while providing a tumultuous underpinning to the "changes, no time" of the relatively brief "1076."

"Old Time" reworks the title track to Azimuth's *How It Was Then....Never Again* (ECM, 1994), but morphs its bluesy origin into a more potent opportunity for both Wheeler and Sulzmann, with Laurence and France effortlessly flowing from feather-light support to more intense accompaniment—in particular during a solo that proves to be amongst the saxophonist's best of the set.

Parricelli is as capable of fiery energy as anyone in the group, but his best moment comes on the appropriately titled "Pretty Liddle Waltz," the album's penultimate track and a feature for both the guitarist's impeccable tone and harmonic sophistication in his accompaniment, but also for his attention to detail and dynamics during a thematically focused solo that may demonstrate the guitarist's early roots in label mate John Abercrombie but, having long since transcended such reductionist characterizations, is now pure Parricelli and yet another reason why it's such a shame he's heard from so infrequently.

Not unlike the swan song of another great loss (and, at one time, Wheeler collaborator), saxophonist Michael Brecker's *Pilgrimage* (*Heads Up*, 2007), it's quite remarkable that, as with Brecker just a scant six months before his passing, the already weakening Wheeler still had an album like *Songs for Quintet* in him just nine months before his death. Still, sometimes the old saying that someone plays as if his life depended on it is more than just an adage. It's impossible to know if Wheeler knew his days on earth were truly numbered, but with *Songs for Quintet* another legend may now have passed, but not before delivering an album that's not just as good a swan song as anyone could hope for, but a recording that stands amongst the rest of his discography as one of his absolute finest. ---John Kelman, allaboutjazz.com

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