

Tommy Smith - Step By Step (1989)

Written by bluesever

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1 *Ally The Wallygator* 2 *Step By Step* 3 *Ghosts* 4 *PillowTalk* 5 *Time Piece* 6 *Springtime* 7 *Freetime* 8 *Ever Never Land* Bass – Eddie Gomez Drums – Jack DeJohnette Electric Guitar – John Scofield Keyboards – Mitch Forman Piano – Mitch Forman Tenor Saxophone, Composed By – Tommy Smith

Tommy Smith came to fame as a precocious young talent in Gary Burton's band, where I first had the opportunity to hear him play. It was not long after this that he released his debut album, *Step By Step*, on Blue Note, no less; high praise from the Jazz label indeed.

For those of you wanting a short cut to "what's it like?", many have compared the early Smith's style to a strange mix of Michael Brecker and Jan Garbarek, and such comparisons are understandable. However, they miss the point.

This album sees Smith produced by Burton and matched with a veritable A-Team of Jazz: Jack De Johnette on drums; John Scofield on guitar; Mitch Forman on piano and keyboards; Eddie Gomez on bass. And it is this team that has an equally powerful influence on the all-original set of compositions.

"Ally The Wallygator" kicks off the set with a mood somewhere between Brecker's "Sea Glass" and Garbarek, a serene lilting, ascetic tenor line over a hypnotic bass line and synth pads, that slowly builds. "Step By Step", "Pillow Talk" and "Springtime" are more straight ahead jazz pieces in the Brecker vein, the latter two featuring some outstanding ensemble work and solos, especially from Scofield. Smith's solos show great invention, but also a confidence and almost restraint that is rare. The last two tracks on the CD version, "Freetime" and "Ever Never Land"

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provide a bit more wilder experimental music, the former having a feel of "Brekker plays Coltrane", and the latter a solid, somewhat wilder acoustic quartet workout.

However, there are two unique pieces here too. "Ghosts" is a simple yet haunting (pun not intended) piece over an augmented synth backdrop, that provides a foil for some beautiful solos from Mitch on pianos and John Scofield, his sinewy guitar lines providing a twisted, Hitchcockian suspense. "Time Piece" is a live favourite, often played with a unrelenting tick-tock rhythm: here it is played a little slower, more laid back, but with an altogether greater sense of menace. This six minute piece provides an extended workout for Smith, who proceeds to give a concise masterclass in building suspense to ever more breathless heights.

Across all of these pieces, some have criticised Smith for sounding too derivative, but I think that is short-sighted: his solos show maturity of choice, superior understanding of his form, and the technique of a true virtuoso. Some have even criticised Smith for being too restrained: well I suppose there are those who also criticise Mozart for spurning rubato and usually requiring "a tempo" playing, but it doesn't mean they're right. :)

But above all, this set has a fantastic band sounding like they've played together for years, playing inventive music with passion. Some may not like the uncompromising nature of some of the playing (Scofield in particular, who though one of my all-time favourites, is not everyone's cup of tea).

But this is to mind Jazz at its best: uncompromising, uncontrived, devoid of "riffs" and full of subtle interplay. ---DVDER, amazon.com

Tommy Smith is a Scottish saxophonist who attended the Berklee College in Boston. At eighteen, on the recommendation of Chick Corea, he joined Gary Burton's group, alongside bassist Steve Swallow, pianist Makoto Ozone and drummer Adam Nussbaum and stayed for 18 months. Gary Burton said that "Tommy Smith, is the most talented tenor sax star to arrive on the world scene in years."

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In 1989, Smith, still only twenty-two, signed to Blue Note Records and recorded Step by Step. The album was produced by Gary Burton, and featured a band composed of John Scofield (guitar), Eddie Gomez (Bass), Mitchel Forman (keyboards) and Jack DeJohnette (drums). Both Scofield and DeJohnette had played with Miles Davis, while Gomez spent a total of eleven years with the Bill Evans Trio. Forman had played with John McLaughlin, Wayne Shorter and Pat Metheny. Everybody in the band was a top notch musician.

The first track on the album, Ally the Walligator, is a particular favorite of mine. There is a real influence of Jan Garbarek on this album. Tommy Smith wrote all the music. John Scofield has said that "Tommy is an incredible writer and a great, great player." Last year the Guardian wrote that "Smith, a teenage prodigy in the 80s, is nowadays one of the most widely respected of European jazz musicians." The Virgin Encyclopedia of Jazz awarded this album 4 stars (out of 5). ---David Lindsay, amazon.com

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