Tommy Smith Sextet – Evolution (2003)

1 Woodstock 10:16 2 Easter Island 9:55 3 Lisbon Earthquake 10:55 4 Siege Of Leningrad 9:37 5 Sputnik's Tale 8:58 6 On The Way To Barnard's Star 9:20 Bass – John Patitucci Drums – Bill Stewart Guitar – John Scofield Piano – John Taylor Tenor Saxophone – Joe Lovano Tenor Saxophone, Composer – Tommy Smith

Transatlantic collaborations have grown increasingly common in jazz over the past decade. Several of the most high-profile ones (eg Hermeto Pascoal with a mixed Brazilian/British band, Michael Brecker with an expanded ensemble) have been fuelled from the UK side by public arts investment. They have often produced genuinely spontaneous results, and not the awkward formality that could have emerged from such arranged marriages.

Scottish Arts Lottery cash has helped back this ambitious project, first conceived by saxophonist Tommy Smith, bringing him together with five of the best contemporary jazz musicians on the world circuit. Americans Joe Lovano (saxes), John Scofield (guitar), John Pattitucci (bass) and Bill Stewart (drums) are present, and Britain's John Taylor on piano.

It's a real contemporary jazz album driven by its leader's vision. All the pieces are Smith's (drawn from his regular work with Scottish poet Edwin Morgan), several involve multifarious sub-themes and fiendish ensemble intricacies. The players have clearly been given plenty of licence to interpret a highly personal music in their own ways. Though the improvisers occasionally sound as if they're walking on eggshells across Smith's frequent shifts of tempo and structure, for the most part the set (representing only half the music the sextet recorded in New York last April) sounds remarkably bold, and draws immense invention from all the participants.

The Americans were allegedly very impressed with John Taylor, and the pianist's contribution to the sense of flexible ensemble cohesion and purpose is considerable. Smith, who has played with Lovano and Scofield before, cannily builds a little of their late-1980s ensemble sound together into the opening Woodstock, but the tone-poem Easter Island is pure north-European ambience, the two saxophones exhaling spacious harmonies and barely more than puffs of air over Taylor's floating meditations and Bill Stewart's cymbal showers.

Smith's control of high sax sounds (he sometimes suggests a singer, or the long notes of the late Johnny Hodges) has become a world-class act of late. Lisbon Earthquake is an asymetrical Latin swinger with constant tempo disruptions (Taylor negotiates it with restless aplomb), and Seige of Leningrad has elements of free-improv, a Michael Brecker band-sound and Scottish pipe-music in it, with the band sounding at its most cohesive and collectively adventurous. Sputnik's Tale has a Thelonious Monk-like melody turning into a 1960s-Miles feel, and all the players demonstrate their absorption in the group atmosphere on the winding, sax-harmony finale On The Way To Barnard's Star. An ambitious and sophisticated venture, with composition and freedom elegantly poised. ---John Fordham, theguardian.com

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