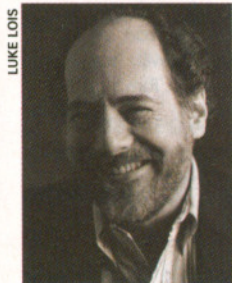


Lost in Transition



LUKE LOIS

The middle 1960s were strong years for jazz. The writing was not yet engraved on the wall: rock 'n' roll had morphed into rock and soul, redefining the entire popular music landscape, but jazz musicians continued to operate with the confidence of artisans who have a fixed and essential place. They were more intrigued with the unholy terrors of the avant-garde than the comings and goings of Brit bands with funny haircuts, and more concerned with lining up gigs than accommodating themselves to the latest fashions. That attitude began to change by 1968, and underwent shock therapy during the next

two years as the fusion hydra reared its head: jazz clubs closed; jazz labels declined, folded or modified their bill of fare; jazz musicians decamped for the academy, the studios and Europe, or invested in electronic accessories. Funny haircuts became *de rigueur*: Is there a musician who doesn't cringe at photographs taken of him or her in, say, 1974?

Yet in that brief window—the LBJ years—looking out on jazz as we knew it and not as it would soon be, a kind of workaholic innocence prevailed and the sheer number of prized recordings was huge. Blue Note was at an absolute peak, adding Cecil, Ornette, Eric Dolphy and Andrew Hill to the mix before falling into the maw of Liberty Records. Prestige was reclaiming the postbop mantle for a last hurrah with Jaki Byard, Booker Ervin, Sonny Criss and Teddy Edwards. Impulse!, Verve and Limelight looked as slick as they sounded, running the gamut from Ben Webster, Benny Carter and Dizzy Gillespie to Wes Montgomery, Bill Evans and Archie Shepp. Meanwhile, at the so-called majors, RCA dawdled in perennial confusion, while Decca turned to reissues, Capitol remade itself as “the home of the Beatles,” and Columbia, with John Hammond back in harness after more than a decade at Mercury and Vanguard, attempted, with mixed results, to expand on the steady output of Miles and Monk.

Hammond facilitated pleasing instrumental sessions by George Benson, Illinois Jacquet, Herb Ellis, Stuff Smith, Clare Fischer, Don Ellis and two major signings that are too often overlooked. *Mosaic Select* has now rescued them with indispensable collections of the albums Hammond produced by pianist Denny Zeitlin (1964-67) and saxophonist John Handy (1965-68), both longtime residents of San Francisco with full-time alternate careers, Handy as an educator, Zeitlin as a psychotherapist. The best of the original albums—Handy's *Live at the Monterey Jazz Festival* and Zeitlin's *Carnival*—are at once timeless and time-defining, capturing a pivot-point when the most advanced thinking at the jazz center involved an understanding of free jazz and an almost subliminal recognition that rock wasn't just for kids anymore. This music is radiant with ambition: the exhilaration of owning your music and your instrument with if-you've-got-it-flaunt-it virtuosity, not for its own sake but to express the immortal joy of *homo ludens*.

A younger colleague recently named Handy's *Monterey* as one of the first fusion albums, which seemed preposterous to me, perhaps because I had grown up with it before anyone spoke of jazz-rock. But you can't miss the westward winds blowing here, in the extended length of the selections, the quintet instrumentation with violin and guitar, the flamenco and backbeat rhythms, and the fastidiousness of Handy's lucid improvisations: “If Only We Knew” is almost half an hour, but the solos are concise, the changeups frequent, and the dynamics measured. This album introduced the Canadian rhythm team of Don Thompson and Terry Clarke, later known for their association with Jim Hall, guitarist Jerry Hahn and

violinist Michael White. All returned for Handy's follow-up album, after which Hahn and White went into fusion with Hahn's Brotherhood (a Hammond project) and the Fourth Way. *Mosaic* includes singles versions of the Monterey tracks, unissued pieces and a concert performance with guitarist Sonny Greenwich plus violin and cello, but not Handy's third album, *New View*, with Bobby Hutcherson and Pat Martino.

Much of the Handy material was released by Koch in the 1990s, but the Zeitlin albums have languished, absurdly, for four decades. Hammond initially recorded him with flutist Jeremy Steig, and then released three studio albums (collected here with an hour of previously unreleased pieces, all worthy, some exceptional, including an uncharacteristically straight-ahead “I Got Rhythm”), and a concert album, not included. In a felicitous coincidence, the *Mosaic* set was issued at the same time as Zeitlin's *In Concert* (Sunnyside), an ideal complement because it shows he never stopped growing while underscoring the fact that he had his stylistic ducks in a row as early as 1964. Hammond did him no favor by adorning the cover of *Carnival* with magazine hype: “The most inventive jazz pianist in at least two decades.” I love “at least”; so much for Bud and Monk. Also working against him was his second career, which limited his touring time and encouraged those who weren't listening to dismiss him as a dilettante with chops.

Big mistake: Zeitlin, born in 1938, sounds like no one else in his generation. He seems constitutionally incapable of playing an expected harmony; the pleasure in listening to him, especially when he dissects (*le mot juste*) standards, is bound up with his lightning aversions of the commonplace. The Columbias combine alluring borderline funk ditties—“Repeat,” “Cathexis,” “Carole's Garden,” “Skippy-ing”—that go down like aged bourbon but with just enough harmonic surprises to keep you from taking them for granted, with expansive meditations on classic jazz (he digs Gigi Gryce), pop tunes and originals that manage the hat trick of not sounding as intricate as they obviously are. Confident enough to re-harmonize “Maiden Voyage” when its slash chords were still new, he is more impressive turning the extremely familiar changes of “All the Things You Are” into an adventurous fantasia. Then as now, he circumvents the sentimental. His two-part “Mirage” is a waltz that isn't a waltz—it never stays still long enough to fall into line, but the tune and his extrapolations are so strong that your best option, as with Ornette, is to follow the melody. Zeitlin's signature technique is a two-handed, chromatically omnivorous attack that washes across the keyboard, alternated with dancing single-note figures that have, no matter the speed, the articulation of discrete bells. He works with the best bassists and drummers, including Cecil McBee and Freddie Waits, Charlie Haden and Jerry Granelli, and on the new album, Buster Williams and Matt Wilson—they shoot the moon on a supersonic “Mr. P.C.” **JT**