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The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra: OverTime: Music Of Bob Brookmeyer

By **DAN BILAWSKY**,

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Trumpeter Thad Jones and drummer extraordinaire Mel Lewis may have given birth to the band that's now known as The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, but the late Bob Brookmeyer gave the group artistic independence at a time when it was sorely needed.

When Jones left the fold and departed for Europe at the tail end of the '70s, things could've gone a very different way for this storied outfit: it could've simply carried on as a pretty good band that covered Thad Jones' music, endlessly recycling songs of the then-recent past. The Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra, né Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra, was certainly headed in that direction at that point in time, but Brookmeyer was the game-changer. He took the reins, ushering in a new era of creativity for this organization.

Brookmeyer tightened and polished up the band's interpretations of the Jones charts, brought in new music, and allowed the organization to stand as a creative force that's forever connected to its founders, but constantly evolving. In the process, he also got his own creative juices flowing again, as this band served as his laboratory for compositional and arranging experimentation. Brookmeyer eventually followed in Jones' footsteps, leaving America and setting up shop in Europe, but he never completely severed his ties with this organization. He played with the band on occasion and, in 2008, he finally brought up the idea about making a new recording with The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra.

While Brookmeyer didn't live long enough to see this album to completion, he was around long enough to shape it. He delivered four new pieces—all homages to various members of the band—that share space with some of his older compositions. "Suite For Three" focuses in on the sound of longtime VJO alto hero Dick Oatts, who works atop fragmented rhythms on his namesake movement, trumpeter Scott Wendholt, whose horn brings warmth and brightness to the sensitive setting made in his honor, and tenor saxophonist Rich Perry, who uncorks one brilliant phrase after another on his lively showcase number. The fourth new one—"At The Corner Of Ralph And Gary"—is a sly swinger that gives pause to admire the interactive spirit of band with soloist(s); the handiwork of the two soloists—baritone saxophonist Gary Smulyan and tenor saxophonist Ralph Lalama—lines up perfectly with the movements of the whole apparatus here.

The four remaining selections on the album were culled from the Brookmeyer book that took shape between 1979 and 1981. Oatts gets to revisit Brookmeyer's landmark "Skylark"

arrangement more than three decades after he originally recorded it with this group; a parade of soloists shine during "XYZ"; rapidly shifting ideas and chromatic pathways are explored during "The Big Time," a previously unrecorded Brookmeyer chart from said time period; and the powers of space and suggestion are on display as Oatts' flute casts spells during the haunting "Sad Song."

Most composers that are blessed with long life tend to outlive their inventiveness, but the opposite seems to be true in the case of Bob Brookmeyer: his body left this world in 2011, but his body of work is still turning heads.

Track Listing: The Big Time; Suite For Three: Oatts, Scott, Rich; XYZ; Skylark; At The Corner Of Ralph And Gary; Sad Song.

Personnel: John Mosca: trombone; Luis Bonilla: trombone; Jason Jackson: trombone, bass trombone; Douglas Purviance: bass trombone; Nick Marchione: trumpet, flugelhorn; Tanya Darby: trumpet, flugelhorn; Terell Stafford: trumpet, flugelhorn; Scott Wendholt: trumpet, flugelhorn; Dick Oatts: alto saxophone, soprano saxophone, flute; Billy Drewes: alto saxophone, soprano saxophone, flute; Rich Perry: tenor saxophone, flute; Ralph Lalama: tenor saxophone, clarinet, flute; Gary Smulyan: baritone saxophone; Jim McNeely: piano; John Riley: drums; David Wong: bass; Frank Basile: bass clarinet (3, 5, 8); David Peel: French horn (1, 5, 6, 8); Michael Truesdell: percussion (1, 5, 8).

Record Label: Planet Arts

<http://www.vanguardjazzorchestra.com/home/blog/new-cd-project-music-of-bob-brookmeyer>

<http://www.vanguardjazzorchestra.com/home/blog/recording-session-for-our-new-cd-overtime-music-of-bob-brookmeyer>

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<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/overtime-music-bob-brookmeyer/id918550046>

Overtime: Music of Bob Brookmeyer

The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra

	Name	Time
1	The Big Time	4:01
2	Suite for Three, Oatts (feat. Dick Oatts)	5:57
3	Suite for Three, Scott (feat. Scott Wendholt)	6:39
4	Suite for Three, Rich (feat. Rich Perry)	5:42
5	Xyz	14:33
6	Skylark (feat. Dick Oatts)	7:45
7	At the Corner of Ralph and Gary (feat. Ralph Lalama & Gary Smulyan)	11:09

	Name	Time
8	Sad Song	10:37

<http://jazzdagama.com/reviews/cds/the-vanguard-jazz-orchestra-overtime-music-of-bob-brookmeyer/>

There is a recording that Bob Brookmeyer did in 2006, a few years before he died, entitled *Spirit Music*, which is probably the most appropriate title he ever gave one of his albums. Indeed his music—all of it—came close to the connotation of spectral music. He will be remembered for embracing the voices of the instruments of a big band. The trumpets, French and English horns, trombones, reeds and woodwinds (clarinets, oboes the bassoon, flutes and saxophones) gave the music he wrote and arranged a voice that was rich in texture and burnished and gleaming in timbre. This is how his music is remembered in a magnificent recording, *OverTime—Music of Bob Brookmeyer* by the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, as the Thad Jones—Mel Lewis Orchestra came to be called after the death of Mel Lewis in 1990. This recording has been made under the direction of alto saxophonist and flutist Dick Oatts who has masterminded the performance of Mr. Brookmeyer’s arrangements for this superb 16+3 orchestra. It is a landmark event, perhaps one of the finest big band recordings made in the last decade, if not more. And it is not only the arrangements of Bob Brookmeyer that have made it so.

The performances of the artists here, all starts in their own right, are collectively as stellar and stronger on the works’ dramatic element in what could easily be described as its spiritual dimension. If it ever gets nominated for awards, which much of Bob Brookmeyer’s work did, it would be deemed *Hors Concours* although it ought to win because of its packaging. But more so because of the music, all of it, which is singularly beautiful. “Suite for Three,” is a piece in three sections and for three brass and winds is hair-raisingly dramatic for its content and execution. The voice of the horns is so elegant the music might have well said to have been sung here. “Skylark,” with its multiple textures is equally beautiful even in its resonant dissonances and Bob Brookmeyer’s arrangement of it might easily have said to be made up of latter day Renaissance polyphony. Such is its superb craftsmanship and timeless beauty. It is laudable to have such a varied selection of longish works composed by Mr. Brookmeyer on a single CD, so much so that it leaves the listener wanting more—a double-CD of more of the same perhaps, but then it is appropriate to settle for this one, especially after listening also to “Big Time,” “XYZ,” measured and exquisite pieces; and “At the Corner of Ralph and Gary.” But surely the crowning glory is the piece, “Sad Song.”

None of this, of course, not even the finest work by Mr. Brookmeyer, would have been possible were it not for the superb work of this big band under the guidance of Dick Oatts. The players are not simply accomplished in their own right; they give of their best in a manner that fashions the finest work in an ineffable way. Individual details are striking throughout and the sense of beauty is regarded every time a phrase or a line is sounded. In fact the one word to describe the effect of this album on the ear would be “monumental.”

Track List: The Big Time; Suite for Three: Oatts; Scott; Rich; XYZ; Skylark; At the corner of Ralph and Gary; Sad Song.

Personnel: Nick Marchione Trumpet and Flugelhorn ; Tanya Darby Trumpet and Flugelhorn ; Terell Stafford Trumpet and Flugelhorn; Scott Wendholt: Trumpet and Flugelhorn ; John Mosca: Trombone; Luis Bonilla: Trombone; Jason Jackson: tenor and bass trombone; Douglas Purviance: bass trombone; Dick Oatts: alto and soprano saxophones, flute; Billy Drewes: alto and soprano saxophone, flute; Rich Perry: tenor saxophone, flute; Ralph LaLama: tenor saxophone, flute and clarinet; Gary Smulyan: baritone saxophone; Jim McNeely: piano; John Riley: drums; David Wong: bass; Frank Basile: bass clarinet (3, 5, 8); David Peel: French Horn (1, 5, 6, 8); Mike Truesdell: percussion (1, 5, 8)

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