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Where To Go & Who To See

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ON-STAGE AND OFF-, IT'S QUICKLY apparent that there's more to Jed Levy than meets the eye and, more to the point, the ear.

A stocky 37-year-old of medium height, the bearded, bespectacled saxophonist favors sports jackets that accentuate his professorial look. In conversation, this native of Bridgewater, New Jersey, who now lives in Flushing, Queens, with his wife and daughter, is animated and articulate. He'll discourse on technical matters—chord changes, pedal points, odd meters—with the precision of a musicologist, then modulate into more earthy subjects. He's academic one moment, jocular the next, as the situation dictates. There's nothing insincere or shallow about him; it's simply that he reveals himself in stages, seeming introverted at times, extroverted at others, but always himself. One might say, of both his person and his passion (namely, modern jazz), that Levy has hidden depths.

A regular on the Big Apple jazz scene since he was graduated from the New England Conservatory in 1980, tenorist Levy (who also plays soprano and flute) has been highly visible the past few years. In addition to gigging as a sideman with pianist Don Friedman, guitarist Peter Leitch (on whose *Colours & Dimensions* CD he plays) and vibist Gust Tsilis (for three years of Sunday nights at Visiones), Levy has been increasingly busy with his own foursome. The quartet he brings to Visiones July 17-20 features his pianist of choice, the estimable John Hicks, with bassist Dwayne Dolphin and drummer Terry Clarke.

Levy's timing is propitious, because his second

album as a leader, *Sleight of Hand*, has just been issued on SteepleChase, and he's also shopping around another heady quartet session. Possessed of a firm, medium tone akin to that of Hank Mobley or Stan Getz, Levy achieves an immediate rapport on the CD with pianist George Colligan, bassist Ron McClure (who introduced Levy to Nils Winther of SteepleChase) and drummer Gerry Gibbs.

"My overall concept when I present myself as a leader—going back as far as my 1987 recording debut for Reservoir, *Good People*—is not only to blow good solos, but to use as wide a range as possible in terms of composition, orchestration and timbre," he explains. "I want to give the listener as much as I possibly can in terms of programming and variety of colors, feels and rhythmic environments."

Levy's "number-one influence on all levels," he readily relates, is Duke Ellington: "I'm not trying to re-create any of his music, but the depth and amount of color he produced was amazing. By 1930, Duke probably provided the guideways to everything we consider innovative and contemporary in jazz today." As for band-presentation, Levy credits Tom Harrell and Bobby Watson & Horizon with "giving the audience *everything* a good group has to offer." ("Beyond the Blue," a Levy original from the unreleased quartet date with pianist Geoff Keezer, bassist Essiet Okon Essiet and drummer Marvin "Smitty" Smith, is dedicated to Watson's group.)

Unlike many composers who write mostly on-demand, when a project looms, Levy writes "all the time, when the muse strikes me," he says. Then, when a gig or recording comes up, he draws from his stockpile pieces that "fit the character" of the occasion and the players involved. For *Sleight of Hand*, Levy picked six originals that "were fairly easy to jump in and blow on." In fact, however, the deceptively complex nature of the tunes belies Levy's statement about the CD, which was arranged on short notice and cut in just 3½ hours.

The title track, for instance, boasts a simple, singable melody with unusual harmonic underpinnings. Similarly, on "Did I Remember?," a '20s standard played in two keys with "Giant Steps"-like reharmonizations, the listener isn't hearing what he thinks he's hearing. "But I don't want people to hear the mechanics of it," he emphasizes. "I don't think of it as mechanics—I just *hear* it." Levy's "Desert Church" takes it impetus, in the first part, from a moorish scale he heard on a Tunisian flute piece, and, in the second, from Ellington's sacred music. All in all, though, *Sleight of Hand*'s net effect on the listener—much like the feeling on the other quartet date, which examines more advanced forms—is indeed palatable. For Levy, who expects to record two quintet CDs in the future (one with Hicks and vibist Joe Locke; the other, with trumpeter Jack Walrath, extracted from Ellington's longer works), melody is paramount. "When I write," he reveals, "everything is around the melody, essentially. If a melody is strong enough, you can go just about anywhere."

The Jed Levy Quartet plays Visiones July 17-20.