

Saxophonist plays New York's Visiones as a consolation prize

Bridgewater native Jed Levy leads a quartet into New York's Visiones tonight. The tenor saxophonist's first album as a leader, "Good People," is getting plenty of air play. Not bad for what Levy considers consolation prizes.

Until a few weeks ago, Levy had been scheduled to join some other East Coast musicians for an extended tour of Japan next month, under a State Department goodwill program called "American Train."

Levy said several agencies were bidding for sponsoring what he said would be "a traveling trade show." He said the successful firm underbid the agency he was associated with "by eliminating all of the music."

Levy said he had been looking forward to the trip because the "Japanese respond so well to American music."

Instead, he's able to accept bookings in the United States. At Visiones, 125 MacDougal St., he'll be joined by Peter Madsen, his pianist on the record, as well as bassist Dean Johnson and drummer John Riley. First set tonight is at 9:30 p.m.

"It was very gratifying that the owner at Visiones encouraged us to play exclusively my compositions if we wanted," said Levy. Four of them are featured on his album on the Reservoir label.

Levy, who now lives in Corona, N.Y., but whose family resides on Hillcrest Road, Bridgewater, said he started playing the saxophone when he was 9 because he "liked the sound."

He recalled that when he was in the fifth grade at Martinsville School, a teacher "wrote charts for us and I guess we played our first gigs at birthday parties and the like."

But he expressed disappointment that in the mid-1970s, Bridgewater-Raritan High School East didn't have a jazz band, "not even a stage band."

After his graduation in 1980 from the New England Conservatory in Boston, Levy appeared with several groups, notably the Jaki Byard Apollo Stompers with whom he recorded in 1984. He described the eclectic pianist as "a true genius" who was as great an influence as the varied horn stylists to whom he "listened," Sonny Rollins, Wayne Shorter, Stan Getz, and Ben Webster.

JAZZ BEAT

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He also appeared with the Peter Leitch Quartet. The guitarist joins him on the front line of his "Good People" recording, which features pianist Madsen, drummer Billy Hart and bassist Rufus Reid.

July Styne's "Just in Time" opens the album on an upbeat, with everyone stretching out. The only other standard is Billy Strayhorn's ballad, "Daydream," featuring the rarely recorded verse done as a duo by Levy and Leitch.

Levy's compositions cover a wide range, including a waltz entitled "Red Lipstick," some unusual structures in the title tune and "Jenkuja," a phonetic spelling of the Polish word for "thank you" and dedicated to his wife Krystyna, whom he married three weeks prior to the recording session in May of 1987. "The Zealots" is a blues which incorporates some Middle Eastern themes.

While his trip to Japan went by the boards, Levy is looking forward to his next recording session in September, with Japanese bassist Kiyota Fujiwara and with Kenny Garrett as a second sax. "We've been friends since I performed with his group in 1985, and he had loaned me his dictionary in anticipation of the trip," Levy said.

Levy said Fujiwara has written "some unusual music ... some of it based on Italian operas ... it should be a lot of fun."



Saxophonist Jed Levy performs in New York City tonight.