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Mike Lee

## My Backyard

OmniTone

By Harvey Pekar

Mike Lee's music contains strong traditional elements: it swings and the improvisation in it is based on preset foundations. But it's also fresh in that some of Lee's compositions have distinctive forms and unique, sometimes very difficult, chord progressions. "Just North of Normal" is an excellent and particularly distinctive tune. It's 16-bars long, but divided unusually into sections of five, seven and four bars, and contains a dense, unusually contoured chord progression. It's mostly in 4/4, but has one 6/4 bar. "Her Hair, Full of Heavenly Glamour..." "Sinuosity" and "Secular Living" are all 22-bars long, but each is divided differently. "Sidewalk Seven" is a 28-bar 2/4 piece. On "Her Hair" Lee does some nice contrapuntal writing, voicing himself on clarinet with his wife, Rebecca, on violin on one theme, while guitarist John Hart plays another. There are attractive combinations of guitar, clarinet, tenor and violin employed during the ensemble passages of "Crooked Halo."



Although he turns in infectious soprano-sax work on his calypso tune "Sandals and Seashells," Lee almost always improvises on tenor here. His main influences are John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, Joe Lovano and Ben Webster. He has such excellent chops that he's able to play long, complex phrases and still sound relaxed. Sometimes he floats over the beat like Shorter. An inventive improviser, ideas flow from his horn in great profusion. He's also interested in textural variety, at times producing a breathy tone and rasping. He sounds somewhat like Webster on "Message From Home," a blues.

Lee couldn't have asked for more sympathetic band members than Hart, pianist Matt Ray, bassist Andy McKee and drummer Tim Horner. Hart and Ray, like Lee, make playing on difficult pieces seem like a breeze. Horner doesn't play loudly, but always seems to be doing the right thing, accenting in the right place.

Some of what Miles Davis said when he denounced dense chord progressions in 1959 was arguable, but he convinced many jazz musicians that he was 100-percent correct. In any event, Lee has shown that complex and unusual chord changes and forms can still help improvisers play creatively.

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