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My Backyard Album Review

Mike Lee My Backyard (OmniTone)



Mike Lee's third CD is a joyous, unorthodox jazz affair, deploying quintet and sextet formats to celebrate family and music.

The Cleveland Heights native moved to New York some 10 years ago, retelling the story of such other jazz giants as Tadd Dameron and Joe Lovano. Lee has a beautiful, warm tone and a fierce improvisational drive, and both come clear in the crying, "After Hours"-styled "Message From Home" and in Charlie Parker's "Relaxin' at Camarillo," the bop classic that ends the disk.

In "Sinuosity," the gypsy blues "Crooked Halo," and the calypso "Sandals and Seashells," this gifted composer and masterful saxophonist has crafted tunes of character, lilt, and elegance, all buoyed with his fatback, velvety saxophone. The yearning, romantic "Her Hair, Full of Heavenly Glamour," and "Secular Living," which alternates a plush moodiness with nervy lines to suggest how hard it is to live spiritually in a secular world, indicate the kinds of concerns that capture Lee's attention.

Backed by his wife (free lance classical violinist Rebecca Harris-Lee), longtime piano associate Matt Ray, and lucid acoustic guitarist John Hart, Lee has spawned a cohesive and stimulating CD. Tunes like "Crooked Halo" and "Secular Living," with their doubled lines, leisurely gait, unpredictable structure, and underlying gentleness, indicate that Lee knows how to find peace with himself. However, the songs are never complacent. While always accessible, they're subtly surprising and, one would think, rewarding to play no matter how difficult. The compositions featuring his wife — particularly "Her Hair" and the mesmerizing "Crooked Halo" — attest to Lee's emotional investment in jazz, a genre he effortlessly and uniquely projects. For Mike Lee, "my backyard" — with its connotations of childhood wonder and play — is home, whether he's reminiscing about his suburban Cleveland upbringing or gazing out his rear window in northern New Jersey.

— Carlo Wolff



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