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The Modern Jazz Quartet – Fontessa – Atlantic/Speakers Corner

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Mono jazz comes alive on re-mastered audiophile vinyl!

The Modern Jazz Quartet – Fontessa – Atlantic 1231 (1956)/Speakers Corner (2018) 180-gram mono vinyl, 36:28 **1/2:**

(John Lewis – piano; Milt Jackson – vibraharp; Percy Heath – double bass; Connie Kay – drums)

As members of Dizzy Gillespie's big band, John Lewis and Milt Jackson



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were establishing a reputation as premier jazz instrumentalists. John Lewis was revered for his inclination toward classical music and its organic integration with jazz. Milt Jackson was a fierce instrumentalist, inspired by bebop. After forming the John Lewis Quartet in 1952, the beginning of a four-decade prominence on the jazz scene was launched. Eventually, the “final” lineup was established with the addition of Percy Heath and Connie Kay. Under the name Modern Jazz Quartet, the ensemble were adept at recording their own albums (on various labels) and collaborating with a variety of jazz icons (Ben Webster, Jimmy Giuffre, Oscar Peterson, Sonny Rollins). Their ability to master improvisation and polyphony was unprecedented. They were adept at restrained, but inspired instrumental jams. Their earliest successes, “Django” and “Bags Groove” have become jazz standards. The Modern Jazz Quartet enjoyed various resurgences throughout their illustrious career, but they were at a creative apex in the 50’s with their catalog on Verve and Atlantic.

Speakers Corner has released a re-mastering of *Fontessa*, (Atlantic/1956). The original recording was engineered by Rudy Van Gelder and John Kraus. Their grasp of mono aural landscapes is superb and the vinyl re-mastering is faithful to the hi-frequency “roll-off” that defined that sound. Side One opens with a Lewis composition, “Versailles”. With a triangle for percussion, Lewis and Jackson play together and intermingle on the melody. The dual-pronged translation mirrors the distinctive, contrasting styles of Lewis (precise, serious) and Jackson (improvisational, bluesy). Heath’s understated double bass fits in perfectly. Perhaps the unique artistry of MJQ is best represented by the ruminative cover of “Angel Eyes”. With a single-note underlying vibraharp and triangle, Lewis executes his graceful, but complex piano notations. The melodic context has a sultry cinematic resonance. Lewis’ poignancy complements Jackson’s energetic be-bop phrasing.

John Lewis

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Always celebrating interpretive range, the title track is visionary.

Fortunately, Lewis (the composer) has provided context to this “suite” in the liner notes. Lewis and Jackson combine on a



classical-infused

prelude (with deft cymbals). The first “movement” is vampy with blues imagery. There are unusual chords and musical structures folded into a medium-swing cool jazz groove. The next part is more improvisational as both Jackson and Lewis (with a surprising gospel flavor) sustain lyrical flashes against a loping bass rhythm. The final segment is more contemporary with edginess and spare dissonance. Kay executes a rare cymbal solo. Side B is loaded with different arrangements. Everyone is familiar with Harold Arlen’s “Over The Rainbow”. Jazz musicians have always been drawn to this piece for its haunting, emotional melody. Lewis delivers a silky intro before he is joined by Milt on the patented dual lead with counterpoint. The physical dexterity of the vibraphone performance is dynamic and explosive. There is a quasi-bounce temp change, before the two soloists combine on a simple, but gorgeous harmony.

Milt Jackson



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“Bluesology” (written by Milt Jackson) is an accomplished concoction of swinging jazz blues. Milt percolates on vibraharp, while John lats down soulful riffs. The overall sound is fuller, almost like a 4-piece big band. In a switch, Lewis shines with improvisational acuity on an extended solo with sprightly chords and soulful inflection. Jackson finishes the jam and the band executes another tempo change at the end. “Willow Weep For Me” is a change of pace with a moody late-night balladry. Again, Lewis can integrate with the rhythm section and layer counterpoint simultaneously. There is a slight rhythm up tick, before the return to bluesy rumination. The finale (“Woodyn You”) is homage to the group’s mentor, Dizzy Gillespie. As advertised it is a polyrhythmic bebop arrangement with syncopation, stops and big time swing flourishes. The amazing coherency of contrasting instrumentalists is intriguing and compelling. Jackson rollicking riffs and Lewis’ understated play merge seamlessly.



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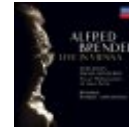
The overall sound mix of Speakers Corner’s vinyl re-mastering is excellent. The mono fidelity is crystalline. The listener can differentiate each individual instrument at all times. The mic placement is brilliant, as evidenced by the precise rendering of minor details like a cymbal or triangle. The vibraphone tonality is crisp and sharp, but also glows with echo. There are band notes (from the Atlantic album) by renowned critic Ralph J. Gleason (*San Francisco Chronicle, Down Beat*).

Fontessa is a jazz classic, made greater by a technology update!

TrackList:

Side One: Versailles; Angel Eyes; Fontessa

Side Two: Over The Rainbow; Bluesology; Willow Weep For Me; Woodyn You



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