New albums from saxophonists Dayna Stephens and Walter Smith III

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Saxophonist Dayna Stephens, whose new album *Peace* was released in November, is one of today's more interesting jazz players. Among other things, he knows how to get out of his own way. He is unpretentious. He is not one of those soloists who contort themselves with tuneless complexity through the measures of their songs and who cannot conceive of a moment of musical intensity that does not involve screaming and growling their way through the more out-of-the-way corners of their instrument.

Stephens (born 1978) has often emphasized the importance of creating singable melodies both in his compositions and during improvisations. He has declared his admiration for singers like Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett, and their ability to give subtle shading and subtext to melodies. Such an approach requires patience and Stephens has more of it than most of his contemporaries.

He is out to reach a broad, popular audience. His music is accessible, but is it not simple-minded. His best music never leaves the audience where he found them.

That Stephens has been able to achieve what he has is all the more remarkable given the precarious state of his health. Stephens suffers from Focal Segmental Glomerulosclerosis, a condition that produces scarring in the kidneys eventually leading to kidney failure. He is forced to plan tours around his dialysis schedule, as he continues to record and perform while awaiting a kidney transplant.

The song that gives his latest album its title is a composition by the late pianist Horace Silver (see: Prolific composer and master jazz pianist Horace Silver dies at 85). The gentle, contemplative performance, featuring fine solos by Stephens and renowned pianist Brad Mehldau, sets the tone for the rest of this very thoughtful and lyrical album.

"I Left My Heart in San Francisco," the song so closely associated with Bennett, might easily have lent itself to a kitsch reading or, worse, some kind of avant-garde "deconstruction." Stephens plays it straight, his solo adding to and elaborating the melody and its emotional content. The second half of the song features an unexpected leap forward in tempo by the talented drummer Eric Harland, whose choice only complements the other performers. He pushes—but does not force—the song forward.

There is a lovely version of Bossa Nova composer Antonio Carlos Jobim's "Zingaro," in which Stephens' saxophone cradles Jobim's light, airy melody as if being careful not to break it. Guitarist Julian Lage joins in with an impressive solo.

"Oblivion" by Argentine *nuevo tango* composer Astor Piazzolla is an interesting and welcome choice, as are surprising renditions of two works by film composer Ennio Morricone, "Brothers" and "Deborah's Theme."

As an interpreter, Stephens does his material justice. He takes even some of the more well-worn torch songs seriously. He brings just the right note of melancholy and disappointment to a strong version of "The Good Life," avoiding the temptation to shift his phrasing into more melodramatic territory.

The only notable misstep on the album is Stephens' rendition of the standard "Body and Soul," which never quite coheres as it should. Stephens is perhaps trying too hard to surprise and craft memorable or unusual phrases. It's one of the few recordings on which he seems too self-conscious.

Among the most enjoyable performances is "Moonglow," a duet performed with bassist Larry Grenadier. The recording is a brief but enjoyable take

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on the classic swing tune. While a relatively straightforward rendition that some might feel is of little significance, it is a tasteful, mature and, again, mercifully unpretentious performance—a deceptively simple pleasure more listenable and engaging than so much of what is recorded today.

Walter Smith III

Walter Smith III (born 1980) is another talented saxophonist. He has found success as a leader of his own groups and as a member of notable ensembles, including the quintet led by trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire. His latest release, *Still Casual*, is not without its charms but suffers from many of the problems Stephens is able to avoid.

One listens to Smith with interest, but is never quite gripped by him. His band is busy, always hustling along. There is never quite enough space, never enough left unsaid—no room, really, for the audience.

Much of it is as one would predict. The drumming of Kendrick Scott is appropriately "atmospheric" for so-called "progressive jazz," always interjecting and obtrusive. The soloists tend to feel a bit formless and scattered over it. The same goes for the melodies. They stretch on and on, never quite resolving themselves.

"Something New" features a strong solo by Smith, but in the course of the performance no one in the band ever plays the role of accompanist. The musicians are only playing at the same time, which is not to say "together."

Smith's playing on "Kaleidoscope" also has its moments, but the music never develops into very much. The churning, swirling foundation set down by the band—which never lets up—is a bit too clean and calculated ever to arrive at anything especially powerful.

There is something insulated about the music. One doesn't find a deep sense of necessity or urgency in very much of it. One wonders if the band's intended audience isn't composed merely of fellow musicians and former classmates at one of the many prestigious centers of jazz education.

"Greene" is perhaps the one exception, the most successful performance on the album. It was written in tribute to saxophonist Jimmy Greene, whose 6-year-old daughter Ana was killed in the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary school. One can feel Smith's sadness give way to anger as his solo progresses. His tone is beautiful, even mournful. It is the only song collected here that seems to have something of real life wrapped up in it, the only song in which the choices made by the musicians feel connected with a deep feeling for something.

The long-winded melody of "Processional" feels trivial and busy, following as it does immediately after this performance. The difference in depth between "Greene" and virtually all of the other songs on *Still Casual* cannot be ignored.

One strains, in the end, to remember very much of the album—with the exception of "Greene"—once the music is over.

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