

03-16-07

Review by Robert Reny

International Association of Jazz Record Collectors Journal

iajrc.org

Star Dust & Beyond
A Tribute To Artie Shaw
Dick Johnson Orchestra
Crazy Scot Records CD 20061

Dick Johnson (ldr, cl) Dave Chapman (as,cl) Sil D'Urbano (as, fl) Matt Koza (ts, cl) Ed Harlow (ts) Wendy Macdonald (bar, b-cl, fl) Doug Elliot (tb) Chris Oberholtzer (tb) Chris Dempsey (tb) Leslie Havens (b-tb) Jay Daly (t, flhrn) Trent Austin (t, flhrn) Phil Person (t, flhrn) Kerry MacKillop (t, flhrn) Lou Colombo (t) Paul Odeh (p), Jon Wheatley (el-g) James Chirillo (g) Bronek Suchanek (b) Mark Holovnia (d) Robert Freedman (arr) Jay Brandford (arr). Englewood, New Jersey, February 20 & 21, 2006

In The Still Of The Night/Fungii Mama/Gone With The Wind/The Grabtown Grapple/Star Dust/Moody Street/My Funny Valentine/Waltz For Debby/I Concentrate On You/Anniversary Song/Bossa For Pam/When The Sun Comes Out/My Romance/Pray Tell, Sarah, Where's Dan. TT 58:59

Plan to be thoroughly pleased when you hear this music. It's not by the current Artie Shaw Orchestra (ASO) that talented clarinetist Dick Johnson (b. 1925) has led in performances all around the country since 1983, but by an impressive studio band that Johnson created for the recording. While some of the titles were recorded by Shaw in his heyday, these are all new fresh performances, fueled by the unique arrangements of Freedman and Brandford. Often described as a "clear toned bopp-ish clarinetist," Johnson has impeccable credentials to lead a big modern jazz band, having played with Hefti, Spivak, Pomeroy, Morrow, Goodman, Rich, and Herman. This is Dick's first big band album as leader, although he's led small groups in the past, such as *The Swing Shift*, a very successful octet.

The music, while reflecting Shaw's trademarks of tight cohesive section work and arrangements with plenty of solo space, is as new as tomorrow. This is a big, big band, not the usual smaller complement used by traditional swing outfits. And it's a liberated band – two of its side-people are ladies – refreshing in a male dominated jazz world. Dick is superb throughout the program as expected, with sensitive and swinging support from the rest of the band. Shaw, who picked Johnson to lead the current working band, would probably love this music, as he showed an affinity for modern jazz with his 1949 band and 1954 Grammercy Five. The veteran band leader, Herb Pomeroy, helped prepare the Johnson band for this recording, certainly adding to its excellence.

I think that this is one of the better big band jazz releases in recent years. I won't go into details on each cut because there are excellent liner notes by friend and fellow musician, saxophonist Bill Kirchner that provides chapter and verse for each tune. But my favorites are: "Fungii Mama" and "Pray Tell, Sarah, Where's Dan," both up-tempo, section riffing, and solo-packed; "Gone With The Wind," with Johnson and Koza (ts) noodling over a smooth reed section; "The Grabtown Grapple," Shaw's old Grammercy Five hit, in a big band arrangement that really swings; "My Funny Valentine" that has an inventive kaleidoscopic introduction that leads to an emotional, low register solo by Johnson; a slow burning "I Concentrate On You," featuring tag solos by Koza and Harlow; an in-your-face "Anniversary Song" that'll knock you out of your easy chair; Johnson's original "Bossa For Pam (Dick's daughter)," a Latin flavored change of pace, with Person (flhrn) and D'Urbano (as) as well as Dick playing so well; and "My Romance," an uppity thing with Suchanek's bass leading the attack and a great solo by MacKillop (flhrn). Pianist Odeh, guitarist Wheatley, and drummer Holovnia were luminaries throughout the sessions, particularly Odeh whose inventive solos and support to the rest of the band was so impressive.

A tip of the *IAJRC* hat to the Somerled Charitable Foundation for producing such a creative album, from musical content to sound quality to packaging. And the inclusion of a photo gallery of all the folks involved with the album was such a classy touch. Hopefully, the Foundation will work on the Shaw estate and get permission to record the touring ASO, preferably before live audiences for optimum results.

Highly recommended. *Star Dust & Beyond* is available at Amazon, CD Baby, and other internet vendors as well as at Dick's website, www.dickjohnsonjazz.com. – Bob Reny