

TRITONE ASYLUM – A LIFE OF SIGNS

The release of *A Life of Signs*, the debut recording by TriTone Asylum, documents one of the most interesting and stimulating new jazz groups from Southern California. Co-led by Philip Topping and Peter Sepsis, TriTone Asylum was formed four years ago as a trio consisting of Topping on EVI (Electronic valve instrument), bassist Sepsis and pianist Aubrey Scarbrough (who now plays a part time role in the band). TriTone Asylum has since expanded to a sextet. Its ensembles are colorful, its sound is unique and its music can be called electro-acoustic, blending together both introspective (a la ECM) and soulful jazz with elements from World Music and funk.

“We called ourselves TriTone Asylum,” remembers Philip Topping, “due to the three members that we had at the beginning. The larger group was formed out of the conception of the trio. Although Peter and I run the band, we function as a collective. Everyone in the group is a friend who we had worked with quite a bit previously and each musician has a similar vision of the music.” Tenor-saxophonist Allen Mascari, who at times displays the feel and influence of Joe Henderson and Michael Brecker, takes soulful solos and blends in very well with Philip’s EVI. Guitarist Andy Waddell is a major asset to the group, able to perform both Pat Metheny tunes and soul jazz numbers with equal skill and sensitivity. Keyboardist Jamieson Trotter, bassist Peter Sepsis and drummer Todd Wolf are all very versatile players who fit comfortably into the wide variety of styles that TriTone Asylum performs while adding stimulating and personal interpretations. Philip Topping, who was originally a trumpeter, adds a great deal to the unique sound of the group with his EVI, at times emulating a guitar synthesizer or a keyboard while playing with the attack of a trumpet.

TriTone Asylum first started gigging at the Grand Star Jazz Club.

Since then they have worked at the Hollywood Studio Bar and Grill and the legendary Baked Potato. Earlier this year, TriTone Asylum had the pleasure of sharing the bill with Charlie Haden and Larry Goldings during a Muse/ique show in Pasadena. A Life Of Signs features the group performing eight of their favorite songs. Aubrey Scarbrough returned to the band to sit in for Trotter on “Red Clay” and “Spring Ain’t Here.”

The colorful collection begins with their version of Pat Metheny’s “Have You Heard.” Peter says, “As a bass player, it is a joy for me to play on this. The time keeps changing throughout the tune and I enjoy the challenge.” Philip adds, “You are not going to hear too many bands cover this Pat Metheny song or the other two, and you certainly will not hear them at jam sessions! I always loved the blending of the sounds that Lyle Mays had with Pat Metheny’s guitar and the EVI fits naturally into this music, doing some of the keyboard voicings.” “Have You Heard,” which is in 7/4 time and taken at a relatively fast pace, is both accessible to listeners and a stimulating piece for musicians to play. TriTone Asylum manages to sound relaxed on this piece with Andy Waddell taking a notable solo.

Ralph Towner’s “Icarus” is in a similar thoughtful vein as the Metheny songs. Peter says, “There is a lot of space to the song, and a lot of measures that only have one chord. Less is more on this piece.” The blend between EVI and tenor works particularly well during the melody statements, with Philip Topping and Jamieson Trotter taking well-constructed and fluent solos.

Freddie Hubbard’s “Red Clay” gives the group an opportunity to play a funkier song with the groove expertly set by Peter Sepsis’ bass. The introduction, while similar to the original recording, has a completely different sound due to the EVI. This performance gets heated, particularly during the guitar solo when the band is riffing behind his lead.

Pat Metheny's "Longest Summer" has Philip's EVI hinting strongly at Metheny's synth guitar solo. Jamieson drives the rhythm section and Allen Mascari has a chance to wail on tenor.

"Tell Me A Bedtime Story," a late 1960s piece by Herbie Hancock, finds the group taking aspects of Hancock's and guitarist Henry Johnson's recordings and combining them together with their own ideas. The EVI states the melody, the tenor and guitar solos are passionate, and the group's playing over the closing vamp is quite stirring.

The third Pat Metheny song "Spring Ain't Here" has the band giving the music a strong Latin feel. The catchy and hypnotic melody perfectly fits the sound of Tritone Asylum, with the blazing guitar solo being a highpoint.

Hampton Hawes' somewhat obscure jazz waltz "Sonora" is an offbeat choice that works well. On the most straight ahead piece of the program, the opening groove appears a few times throughout the performance. Jamieson's piano solo is quite inventive and Todd Wolf has the chance to create a brief drum solo.

A Life Of Signs concludes with Freddie Hubbard's "Little Sunflower." Peter says, "I've been playing this song for decades because I just love its Afro-Cuban vibe. The intro by Peter launches a musical adventure for the entire band. After tenor, guitar and EVI solos, the closing vamp features infectious interplay by the full group, bringing the CD to a memorable close.

Having documented their unique versions of some of their favorite songs, future plans for TriTone Asylum include writing, performing and recording their own original music, appearing at more clubs, touring the West Coast and playing at jazz festivals.

The release of *A Life Of Signs* is a major step forward for TriTone Asylum, a band that is adding to the musical legacy of jazz.

Scott Yanow, author of 11 books including *The Great Jazz Guitarists*, *Trumpet Kings*, *Jazz On Film* and *Jazz On Record 1917-76*