

MUSIC REVIEW

‘Common Practice’ by Ethan Iverson Review: Swinging Standards With a Contemporary Twist

On an album recorded at the Village Vanguard, the pianist leads a quartet in revealing the unexpected in familiar songs.



Ben Street, Tom Harrell, Ethan Iverson and Eric McPherson PHOTO: MONICA FRISELL/ECM RECORDS

By Larry Blumenfeld

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In 1969, a trio led by pianist Mal Waldron entered a German recording studio, thus inaugurating Manfred Eicher's new label, ECM. In a brief note on the back of the resulting LP, "Free at Last," Mr. Waldron explained that the album marked "a different approach to my music." His playing there, and mostly thereafter, was stripped-down, percussive, built on vamps and drones, and highly emotional.

During the half-century since, through more than 1,600 subsequent releases, ECM (which stands for "Edition of Contemporary Music") has itself marked a different approach—to recording jazz and what is now commonly called "creative music" (one might argue ECM has lent deepened meaning to that latter term). With pristine and spacious acoustics, a heightened sense of clarity (in everything from musical presentation to package design) and a genre-blurring aesthetic, ECM has built a dedicated following and helped shape jazz's current landscape. To commemorate that legacy, the label will reissue "Free at Last" with previously unreleased tracks in November.

Meanwhile, ECM's forward motion continues with "Common Practice," the new release from pianist Ethan Iverson's quartet, out Friday. If this doesn't amount to a different approach for Mr. Iverson, it does extend the fresh path he's taken lately. In 2017, after 17 years as a founding member, he left the Bad Plus, a trio that fused jazz modernism with indie-rock spirit in mostly extroverted and aggressive fashion. Mr. Iverson's work beyond that group is far more nuanced. A thoughtful student of jazz's history and current scene (whose blog, *Do the Math*, offers essential insights), he now makes music that innovates from the inside out.

Mr. Iverson, who is 46 years old, likes to experiment with distinguished players of his generation; his duets with tenor saxophonist Mark Turner on last year's "Temporary Kings" walked an elegant line between jazz and chamber music. He has also made a habit of aligning with elder masters, recording with the likes of drummers Billy Hart and Albert "Tootie" Heath and bassist Ron Carter. For this quartet, he enlisted two contemporaries, bassist Ben Street and drummer Eric McPherson, to showcase another esteemed elder, trumpeter Tom Harrell, who, at 73, has lost neither his alluringly pungent tone nor his quicksilver reflex for improvisation.

“Common Practice” was recorded during performances at the Village Vanguard, the storied Manhattan club where the Bad Plus first caught the ear of a Columbia Records executive. Mr. Harrell’s recordings focus mostly on his own challenging compositions. Here, save for two blues-based pieces from Mr. Iverson, the program is jazz standards. The idea was to celebrate the peculiar magic Mr. Harrell brings to familiar songs—a combination of trance-like intensity and propulsive drive, of vulnerability and force.

Beginning with George and Ira Gershwin’s “The Man I Love,” which Mr. Iverson enters with a pensive statement of melody and low-end rumbles, Mr. Harrell captivates through tender, long tones that evaporate into thin air, phrases that speak as deeply through silences as through sound, and brief yet bracing double-time statements. On Denzil Best’s “Wee,” here set to a calypso rhythm, Mr. Harrell solos over chord changes in the bebop style that begot the tune, yet his improvisation transcends idioms and eras.

This album answers jazz’s current existential question—should we swing or not?—with an emphatic affirmative. Yet it doesn’t sound nostalgic or even terribly conventional, owing to the relaxed and elastic feel achieved by this rhythm section. Mr. McPherson’s work in pianist Fred Hersch’s celebrated trio may be more abstract, yet his embellishments are no less painterly here. Mr. Street’s authority in straight-ahead jazz situations sometimes makes him seem invisible, like a building’s foundation; still, his counterpoint on “Out of Nowhere” commands attention.

Mr. Iverson’s own wit and accumulated wisdom underscore these arrangements, which were negotiated on the bandstand. His overall approach to “Sentimental Journey” owes to Count Basie, but the clotted dissonance he introduces speaks of Thelonious Monk. His solo on “I’m Getting Sentimental Over You,” with harmonies stacked like cardboard boxes that should fall over yet don’t, is downright subversive.

Mr. Harrell's playing is finely detailed and immediately charismatic, qualities accentuated not only by Mr. Iverson's quartet but also Mr. Eicher's production. Unlike many live recordings, which can sound flat or unbalanced, the music here is lovingly captured and engineered to create a satisfyingly immersive effect. The only thing that likely sounds just as it did at the Vanguard on those January 2017 evenings is the raucous audience applause, which was richly deserved.

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