

ICON

Nick Bewsey, March 2014

Ulysses Owens Jr. ★★★★★

Onward and Upward

D Clef Records

Recently, there's been no shortage of excellent, forward-looking jazz albums led by drummers. For jazz fans who put groove and swing in their plus columns, Grammy-winner Terri Lyne Carrington, Kendrick Scott, Antonio Sanchez, Matt Wilson and Rudy Royston are taking music to new and satisfying heights. You can add Ulysses Owens Jr. to this exceptional lineup—he's a drummer determined to blaze his own trail with sonically inspired beats.

On the positively titled *Onward and Upward*, Owens brings together some of the freshest voices on the NY scene and delivers a set list that neatly connects the past with the present. As he did on his very fine previous release *Unanimous* (Criss Cross, 2012), Owens marries traditional grooves with stylish, contemporary material. He enhances that approach beginning with a welcome outlier at the start of his disc where he sets The Stylistics' "People Make The World Go Round" against a percolating rhythm that could have evolved out of Grover Washington's "Winelight." This tune, the album's only vocal, features the enticing singer Charles Turner and gives the album an attractive starting point. Owens' fresh instrumentals, a mix of covers and originals, make this record work, from a ravishing Phyllis Hyman cover, "Just 25 Miles To Anywhere," to a sparkling Brazilian feature that highlights the incomparable clarinetist and saxophonist Anat Cohen as well as Owens' flair with samba percussion.

To fulfill Owens' vision his band comes fully equipped with chops and invention to burn, like they do with an



animated take of Wayne Shorter's "Fee Fi Fo Fum." Notably, the personnel include pianist Christian Sands (Owens' band mate in the Christian McBride Trio) and the in-demand bassist Rueben Rogers. It's a pearl of a trio that smoothly merges modern jazz swing with a trace of pop to give Owens' band its signature sound. The 22-year-old Sands is poised to be the great pianist of his generation and unlike his more traditional work with McBride, he proffers an astonishing technique that reframes the architecture of Owens' charts. No wonder the drummer calls the pianist "his secret weapon" since one listen to Sands play on his striking arrangement of "Human Nature" will give you reason enough to start following this young wiz.

Ace trombonist (and co-producer) Michael Dease, trumpeter Jason Palmer and Israeli guitar-phenom Gilad Hekselman round out the core group. Fun fact: Palmer is the lead actor in *Guy and Madeline on a Park Bench*, a sweet, cool little jazz movie with a lot of heart, written and directed by Damien Chazelle.

Writing about Owens' earlier recording, I spoke of Owens' natural flow and his gift for making music that sounds and feels good. *Onward and Upward* provides all that and more, mixing beats with evocative tunes that tug at specific emotional threads ("The Of Forgiveness") while connecting with the visceral essence of jazz at the same time. At 31, Owens has both arrived and is just getting started. (11 tracks; 58 minutes)

Catherine Russell ★★★★★

Bring It Back

Jazz Village

The powerhouse vocalist Catherine Russell has a bluesy, authentic style that practically defines exuberance on *Bring It Back*, an energetic collection of early swing tunes, bar songs and punchy dance tunes that flirt with the early R&B, and backed by an exquisite 10-piece band with lots of brass accents, muted trumpet solos and tasty piano licks. Russell's own roots reach directly back to Louis Armstrong—her father Luis Russell worked as Armstrong's bandleader and arranger and penned "Lucille," performed here for the first time. Soulful and flawlessly delivered, Russell belts out gems like "The Darktown Strutter's Ball," Ellington's "I Let A Song Go Out Of My Heart" and nine other rarely heard, utterly dazzling tracks that were written when jazz tunes were the pop songs of their day. Russell is a one-of-a-kind chanteuse who keeps on swinging. (11 tracks; 50 minutes)



Mike DiRubbo ★★★★★

Threshold

Ksanti Records

The kinetic energy on alto saxophonist Mike DiRubbo's 8th solo project, *Threshold*, pops like a Roman candle. This is thrilling modern bop, enriched by DiRubbo's appreciation of the art and teachings of legendary Blue Note alto-saxophonist Jackie McLean. He sheds notes as fast as Jackie Mac, soloing with gratifying intensity and a hint of swagger that's in lockstep with his quintet. Throughout this well-ordered set of nine originals, trumpeter Josh Evans matches DiRubbo's momentum with a flinty tone and tasty solos that dovetail well with the leader's bulletproof charts. Rounding out the rhythm section are three champions on the NY scene. It's a treat to hear the soulful Brian Charette on piano (he's often gigs on jazz records as a first-call