

Bill Carrothers

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Penguin Guide To Jazz on CD

8th and 9th editions (2006 and 2008)

(4 star rating system)

Carrothers is a class act, already endowed with a formidable breadth of experience, and able to fit in with most contemporary jazz situations. That's often a problem when it comes to helming your own dates, but these records aren't short on confidence or ideas. While the session in Go Jazz's After Hours series is a bit one-paced - a dozen ballads all negotiated at a slow walk - Carrothers lays bare the material and breaks it into pristine pieces. One to sample a few tracks at a time. It's rather better recorded than some of the entries in this series.

Duets With Bill Stewart ★★★

The Duets With Bill Stewart record reduces the cast to two, although since Stewart and Carrothers have worked together many times there's no sense of anything missing. The material's a good deal more diverse in both source and treatment; not many modern pianists would think of playing Puttin' on the Ritz, here played with left hand boogie figures which pop in and out of the improvising, or The Whiffenpoof Song. Oddest piece might be I Apologize, in which Stewart rattles out a tempoless tattoo before Carrothers enters to play the tune almost straight. A lot of the music sounds like a private dialogue, and it's hard to get inside.

Swing Sing Songs ★★★1/2

Swing Sing Songs is an extraordinary programme. Carrothers seeks out new material which even the likes of Mehldau haven't thought about - Call Me Irresponsible? Gordon Jenkins' Blue Evening? Keith Jarrett is a spectre at this feast, in part because the pianist has picked up the older player's annoying singalong habit here and there, but it's Jarrett's acute melodic focus and concentration on the line which Carrothers follows, rather than any devotion to the shrine of Keith. When he does Donna Lee, it's tremulously slow, whereas Barry Harris' Reets and I is fast bebop done teasingly straight. The music works a truce between rough-and-ready (Steve Wiese gives them an attractive live sound in the studio) and absolute finesse, and it feels like a real trio at work. More, please.

Ghost Ships ★★★1/2

Ghost Ships is another remarkable trio and record, with Carrothers helming material that seems to speak of mysterious past times, the sea, and those who sail on her. There are three tracks here titled Ghost Ship, and there's also God Bless America and The Navy Hymn. Carrothers unearths another tune that everyone but him has forgotten in Your Hit Parade, and their version of Wayne Shorter's Water Babies, all cool lines and spartan dialogue, is another peg in a concept that feels palpable yet entirely elusive. Denner gets into the spirit on his three horns, baleful at times, wistful at others.

Armistice 1918 ★★★

One can't fault Carrothers for ambition or originality. Here he creates a panorama of music from the First World War, everything from music hall songs such as I'm Afraid To Come Home In the Dark to made-to-measure patriotism of the order of America I Love You and The Rose Of No-Man's Land. Bill's wife Peg handles principal vocal duties, while his ensemble, with the unusual choice of cello and contra bass clarinet, play the music respectfully, imbued perhaps with Carrothers' own passion for history. Improvisatory material fills in the remaining spaces. Initially we were in no-man's land as far as final judgement is concerned, but it improves with knowing.

Shine Ball ★★★1/2

Recorded at two sessions exactly one year apart, this is a complete contrast to the above, 14 improvisations, pure and unadorned. Carrothers' sense of form restricts the threesome from going into the remotest kind of free playing, and several of the pieces sound as if ready-made themes have emerged and blossomed even within the space of three or four minutes. But this is some of the hardest kind of freedom to achieve. King, a thrilling drummer in any situation, embraces the ideas with both hands and delivers some of his wittiest and most accomplished playing, as does Johnson. Delightful and often funny.

I Love Paris ★★★

Keep Your Sunny Side Up ★★★

Though they appeared as a pair, these were actually recorded some way apart and, as is equally obvious above, with different groups. Not so obvious when you listen to the records. Carrothers has an exceptionally strong presence, and while there's a certain democracy in these line-ups, it's him you listen to. Take I Love Paris itself, a slowed-down, almost brooding thing that seems to derive a certain bitter melancholy from the preceding Stars Fell On Alabama. So commanding is the mood that one might almost grudge Thys his brief solo. At moments, Carrothers might be mistaken for Paul Bley, except those brown-edged chords sound like no one but himself and the little harmonic slippages are nicely individual.

You notice the latter most when he plays Monk, a cheeky "Evidence" on the later record, wedged between the originals Salty Peanuts and Church of the Open Air. The time feel is very relaxed, but springy and capable of rapid transition into more abrasive tempos. The choice of material is intriguing. Though there's a nod to more recent pop in Joni Mitchell's Roses Blue, Carrothers clearly loves the old songs. His approach to Keep Your Sunny Side Up is playfully abstract, sounding the tune but plucking at its edges until it falls apart in a lovely shimmer; the reprise is even better. Brother Can You Spare a Dime on the other record has real poignancy and a sting of anger. I Love Paris is perhaps the more satisfyingly coherent of the two. Also maybe the more autumnal. Both are lovely, though.