

We owe this recording by Charles McPherson (born 1939) - the great alto saxophonist with unparalleled sound who brought so much to the music of Charles Mingus and more widely to jazz - to Camille, the daughter, dancer of San Diego Ballet, who inspired her father to compose since 2015 Suites which are the sound material of the ballet of Javier Velasco, its director. This music, Charles McPherson thought to immortalize it in this beautiful recording. The above notice explains the content and the year of creation of the three suites (Song of Songs, Reflection on an Election, Sweet Synergy Suite) included in Rudy Van Gelder Studios, with Maureen Sickler at the helm, at the end of year 2019 by Charles McPherson surrounded by a very nice ensemble: Terell Stafford, Jeb Patton, David Wong, Billy Drummond: all perfect, both for the support and in their chorus. Great jazz perfectly recorded! It is undoubtedly a condensed content compared to the original suites which served as a theme to the ballets, in particular "Reflection on an Election", about the 2016 election of Donald Trump, a suite originally in three movements ("Reflection, Turmoil & Hope"), of which this 6-minute theme remains, a high point of this disc!

As an aside, we can see that an event as catastrophic as the election of Donald Trump can translate into an artist's work of quality. Political consciousness also produces art. It is undoubtedly because jazz artists do not really have a political awareness, as of 2021, of the manipulation of which we are victims with the covid, that they have still hardly translated anything strong on this subject, with a few exceptions (Mathias Rüegg and not in jazz). It is a matter of concern for jazz when it is no longer able to oppose itself in this particular way, that is, by creating beauty and depth in response to horror.

Back to the record: Song of Songs is inspired by the Old Testament, not that of Count Basie (the pre-war orchestra), but the Bible, Volume 1. It is a series of impressions, with climates which respond to the various tables of the ballet, which begins with Lorraine Castellanos (vocal), who manages to make Hebrew swing Abbey Lincoln way, supported in this by the very expressive sax of the leader, to end with a "The Gospel Truth" splendid. Jeb Patton confirms that he is a pianist with an exceptional drive and Billy Drummond that he has a touch of rare delicacy and precision. One cannot fail at times to rediscover the spirit of Charles Mingus, but this is not surprising since Charles McPherson was an essential component of his orchestra (he is present on more than fifteen recordings of the double bass player). The same could be said of Johnny Hodges and Duke Ellington. Johnny Hodges who is also mentioned as a reminiscence by Charles McPherson in his playing (the glissandos until the key called "pronounced scoops" in the libretto) on "Reflection on an Election", a magnificent composition, like a film noir of the late 1950s that ends badly... Evil is certain concerning Donald Trump, but the problem today is that the evil does not end anymore because after Trump it is like during and worse than before. We still have this lyrical work in which Charles McPherson is prodigious only supported by the rhythm section. Jeb Patton's intervention is once again beautiful, and it ends with a stirring conclusion from Charles McPherson to the crack of sound. Great art.

With Sweet Synergy Suite, which dates from 2015, we feel all the lightness of this era, almost happy, which contrasts with the current heaviness. We open with an Afro-Cuban theme ("Sweet Energy"), where Terell Stafford responds to the leader whom Jeb Patton accompanies with his Latin accents, with his usual musicality. "Delight" is a composition in which Charles McPherson gives an idea of the extent of his talent in the bebop register of which he is a master (he also accompanied Barry Harris). Terell Stafford is all-terrain and accompanies him without leaving his part to the cat. "Marionette" confirms this bond, and Charles McPherson shows himself virtuoso and vehement in expression, reminding us of Charles McPherson with Charles Mingus, but no copy, only the great, the beautiful and the always new, for eternity. This theme has already been recorded by the saxophonist in 1995. Jeb Patton is good at it, and Billy Drummond takes a little chorus full of nuances. With "Song of the Sphynx", we change the decor and range (oriental). The sax chorus is a rhythmic delight, and Jeb Patton brings in his own orchestral scale before the double bass of the good David Wong. The finale of the Suite - and of this record - offers a return to a more Afro-Cuban climate with beautiful contributions by Charles, Terell, Jeb, and always Billy's snare or cymbal playing.

Yves Sportis (Jazz Hot's executive editor)