

J. Q. Whitcomb & Five Below Airports review by Michael Handler

Trumpet man J.Q. Whitcomb has been wowing listeners in Santa Fe on his occasional visits from his work overseas. I, along with many others, have been impressed by his quiet power on the horn, and his chops, melodic lines, and ensemble playing ability. He recently asked me to review his three year old CD Five Below and I was eager to hear his recording and share my impressions with our readers. One thing you notice about JQ's CD is that it jumps out at you and gets your interest right away. The other is being introduced to two new monsters in the form of sax man Alec Haavik and guitarist Lawrence Ku Both have their time to shine on the CD, but the real standout guy here is Q.J. himself. But the overall sound is old school, straight ahead, and fun. The date is well recorded and has a live feel which is great for a jazz session. Although there are only 6 tunes on the CD, there's almost an hour of playing time, so everybody gets plenty of time to solo and stretch out.

The CD starts with the title track and introduces us to the players with a slightly Latin tinge, but it's the harmonies that gets your attention...the horns play together beautifully. It's also one of the 3 live tracks on the CD. Track two starts with a funky bass line and guitar riffs that lead to a heavy post-bop line that's right out of the 60's. Another live track written by J. Q. (note: that is one element we don't get to see when J.Q. is in Santa Fe...his writing chops. It's one thing to sit in...another to lead your own group with original compositions. I hope he can stay long enough next time to form his own band....) This track - "fan hops", Also shows the clarity of J.Q.'s trumpet playing. Alec Haavik ain't bad either with his Coltrane-esque playing...he's all OVER that horn! Tunes number three, "Song for the Twins", has a B3 track that adds a pleasing tone, but the moderate tempo and lack of verve makes it one of less exciting tunes on the CD. This is not a Jimmy Smith type B3 sound here, but it does fit the tune. Track number four, "Brindahl", is a slow paced study in counterpoint, melody and harmony. Almost like a Bach tune slooooooowed down and dissected. The rhythm section is in the background and guitarist Lawrence Ku plays a nice line for the first solo as the tune slowly builds. Tune number five, the only cover, is the well-chosen "Soul Eyes" by Mal Waldron, also one of the live tracks. This song showcases J.Q.'s playing and tone, as well as the interplay between the trumpet and tenor as they state the theme in unison and also in a call and response manner. Keyboard man Carsten Kaer solos on a less than perfectly in tune piano (which always adds that real "live" feel, especially with the blues..) But as "Soul Eyes" has a bluesy feel, this is a nice reading of the song for all involved. And it swings as J.Q. gets into his solo...I know my head was bobbing. The band then re-states the theme with renewed energy and ends the tune very softly with a trumpet coda and arco bass that's very, very nice. A final note about track six, nuciform, is the sopranos' use (over use?) of electronics to take this one...out. It sort of comes out of nowhere and I don't believe it's a great fit, but after the solo everyone gets back in the groove to finish the tune and the CD.

But wait....there's more! Just as I was finishing this review, the band came up with a little surprise in the form of one long sustained note, much like a siren or clarion call. An ending note for sure.....

Airports shows that jazz in a truly international language, as shown by this United Nations-like combination of Asian, American and European players that form this band. It is the nature of a place like Shanghai with its diverse population and ex-patriots from all over the world to expect good

musicians, but it's the skill of someone like J. Q. Whitcomb to pull them all together and make such a fine CD.