

CD Reviews: Donna Lee Saxophone Quartet, "Mellow"

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By: Edward Blanco

Formed in 1999 by Zdenko Ivanusic and Andrej Henigman, two classically-trained altoists from Zagreb, Croatia, the Donna Lee Saxophone Quartet is an unaccompanied four-sax reed section playing original compositions from Ivanusic, and a few familiar melodies highlighting saxophone harmonies as you've not heard before. Since 2001 the group has been together with the same cast which also includes Vanja Ilekovic on the tenor and Ales Susa on the heavy baritone.

Mellow is actually the group's second album and follow up effort to their debut disc, "Four Odd." The album features ten tunes of which seven are Ivanusic originals including the title tune from Ivanusic's previous album, "Lost in Html." He is featured here prominently as he takes all of the alto solos except on the title track and on "Blues No.1" where Henigman does the honors.

The program opens up with feisty New Orleans style rendition of "When The Saints Go Marching In" with Ivanusic's alto leading the march of the four saxophones in harmony. If you're familiar with Glenn Miller's music then you may recognize "Little Brown Jug" delivered marvelously by tenor Ilekovic. Ivanusic's "Four To Go" and "Always My Love," present a contrast with the first being a catchy bouncy number while the later fades into a humble lyrical ballad. Also included are one folk song titled "U Krusevo Ogin Gori," "Freedom Piece" showcasing Susa on the baritone who also introduces the wild and raucous closer, "La Cucaracha" played like you've never heard before.

There's frankly very little that's mellow about "Mellow," it is one very unique recording featuring an ensemble of saxophones at times playing in harmonious unison while at other times launching lengthy sax chases that are anything but mellow. The Donna Lee Quartet does a fine job here with a muscle performance on the reeds that succeeds in making one forget about the need for a traditional rhythm section.

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