

DONNA LEE SAXOPHONE QUARTET – MELLOW *LINER NOTES*

The unaccompanied jazz saxophone quartet made its first major appearance in jazz in 1977 with the formation of the World Saxophone Quartet. Since then, the 29th Street Saxophone Quartet and the more avant-garde Rova have made their marks. In 1999 Zdenko Ivanusic and Andrej Henigman, two classically-trained altoists from Croatia who had met while playing in the Croatian Army Symphonic Wind Orchestra in 1992, formed the Donna Lee Saxophone Quartet. By 2001 the personnel had stabilized, with tenor-saxophonist Vanja Ilekovic and baritonist Ales Susa (from Slovenia) becoming permanent members.

Since then, the Donna Lee Saxophone Quartet has performed regularly including several appearances on television and a major concert at the Lisinski Hall in Zagreb. Its impressive recording debut *Four Odd* is now followed by *Mellow* which features ten arrangements by Ivanusic on six of his originals, three standards and the Macedonian traditional piece "U Krusevo Ogin Gori."

"It took me about a year to compose and arrange the music," remembers Ivanusic. "We recorded all of the music in two sessions, in two days, always keeping spontaneity in the music. We try not to sound like other bands, because I don't see any purpose in doing that, so we are always trying new things."

While an emphasis is placed on ensemble work, individual solos are heard along the way. Zdenko Ivanusic, who doubles on soprano, takes all of the alto solos except on "Blues No. 1" and "Mellow" which features Andrej Henigman. While Ivanusic is harmonically more complex, Henigman's tone at times recalls Paul Desmond (especially on "Mellow") and Johnny Hodges. Vanja Ilekovic, the group's youngest player, is already distinctive while baritonist Ales Susa has a very significant role in giving the music its "bottom" and playing bass lines.

Mellow begins with a celebratory version of "When The Saints Go Marching In." Ivanusic sounds jubilant during his solo. Ilekovic is heard during a brief but effective spot on the Glenn Miller hit, "Little Brown Jug."

Having drawn in the listener with a pair of familiar melodies, the Donna Lee Saxophone Quartet follows up with Ivanusic's originals. "Lost In Html" has a pattern played by the baritonist serving as the background for Ivanusic's solo before the full quartet adopts the harmonized line. "Four To Go" features a particularly catchy rhythm while "Always My Love" is a lyrical ballad. The folk song "U Krusevo Ogin Gori" is given a danceable treatment, Andrej Henigman has an opportunity to wail on "Blues No. 1," and "Freedom Piece" has Susa in the spotlight. Finally, the 6/4 piece "Mellow" has some intense riffing behind Henigman while "La Cucaracha" brings the set to a joyous close.

Throughout *Mellow*, The Donna Lee Saxophone Quartet succeeds at displaying its own musical identity, inspired by its predecessors while standing alone, not only in Croatia but throughout the jazz world.

Scott Yanow,

Author of ten books including *The Jazz Singers*, *Jazz On Film*, *Bebop*, *Trumpet Kings* and *Jazz On Record 1917-76*