

Eric Alexander

Boasting a warm, finely burnished tone and a robust melodic and harmonic imagination, tenor saxophonist Eric Alexander brings a seasoned veteran's proficiency and poise to his latest recording, *Nightlife in Tokyo*. As he has on his four previous Milestone Albums as a leader, the 34-year-old colossus-on-the-rise approached this new project with an assured and mature musical vision, gracefully sidestepping the novelties and trends that have come to the fore in so much contemporary jazz marketing.

"I am not consciously trying to do things differently from record date to record date," explains the 34-year-old Galesburg, Illinois native. "I'm just really adhering to formula of assembling good musicians that I'm comfortable playing with, getting quality material - a combination of originals and standards and perhaps some new arrangements on standard tunes-and trying to make the kind of a recording that a jazz fan or musician can put on and enjoy listening to from start to finish".

Alexander has been exploring new musical worlds from the outset. He started out on piano as a six-year-old, took up clarinet at nine, switched to alto sax when he was 12, and converted to tenor when jazz became his obsession during his one year at the University of Indiana, Bloomington (1986-87). At William Paterson College in New Jersey he advanced his studies under the tutelage of Mabern, Joe Lovano, Rufus Reid, and others. "The people I listened to in college are still the cats that are influencing me today," says Alexander. "Monk, Dizzy, Sonny Stitt, Clifford Brown, Sonny Rollins, Jackie McLean, Joe Henderson-the legacy left by Bird and all the bebop pioneers, that language and that feel, that's the bread and butter of everything I do. George Coleman remains a big influence because of his very hip harmonic approach, and I'm still listening all the time to Coltrane because I feel that even in the wildest moments of his mid- to late-Sixties solos I can find these little kernels of melodic information and find ways to employ them in my own playing."

During the 1990's, after placing second behind Joshua Redman in the 1991 Thelonious Monk International Saxophone Competition, Alexander threw himself into the whirlwind life of a professional jazz musician. He played with organ trios on the South Side of Chicago, made his recording debut in 1991 with Charles Earland, and cut his first album as leader in 1992 (*Straight Up for Delmark*). More recordings for Delmark, *Criss Cross*, and *Alfa* followed, leading to 1997's *Man with a Horn*; the 1998 collaborative quartet session with George Mraz, John Hicks, and Idris Muhammad, *Solid!*; and, that same year, the first recording by *One for All*, Alexander's ongoing band with Jim Rotondi, Steve Davis, Joe Farnsworth, Peter Washington, and Dave Hazeltine.

By now, Alexander has lost count of how many albums feature his playing; he guesses 60 or 70. While he has garnered critical acclaim from every corner, what has mattered most has been to establish his own voice within the illustrious bop-based jazz tradition.

"There was a point several years ago where I stopped thinking, 'What would Stitt or Trane do on this tune?'," he says. "I put the horn in my mouth and just played the way that I play, trying to get out the ideas that I had in my head. Although I'm a perfectionist by nature, lately I've been able to be a little more accepting about the way I sound when I play the horn."

"If I'm not mistaken," Alexander concludes, "Joe Farnsworth once told me that Art Blakey used to say, I don't care whose instrument I play, I'll make it sound like me". That's the battle we're trying to win - feeling confident and comfortable in all situations. If you get to the point where you can express yourself

and get your sound, your feeling, and your vibe - whatever your instrument may be - then you've really gotten somewhere."