

A PATH LESS TRAVELED

John Patitucci, *Line By Line*

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John Patitucci first rose in the jazz spotlight as a ferocious technician on both the double-bass and the bass guitar. Over the past twenty-five years his playing has mellowed somewhat while his work as a composer has grown more nuanced with each release. His new disc, *Line By Line*, presents a remarkable high point in that journey: Mr. Patitucci has accomplished a uniquely beautiful blend of contemporary jazz and classical chamber music which achieves in spades that which few jazz composers even dare attempt.

After making his mark as a youngster in the studios of Los Angeles, Mr. Patitucci began to receive broader recognition as Chick Corea's accompanist in the mid-80s. Prominent later engagements included the all-star "Directions In Music" band with Herbie Hancock, Roy Hargrove, Michael Brecker and Brian Blade. Most recently Mr. Patitucci has spent several years in Wayne Shorter's acclaimed rhythm section. Although his work in the Directions and Shorter bands reflects less "shredding" than he favored as a youngster, Mr. Patitucci's 2004 reunion tour with the Chick Corea / Dave Weckl Akoustic Trio found him "bringing it" without hesitation.

The process has brought him into close and consistent contact with the leading jazz composers of the past forty years and he has reaped the benefit not only in his playing but in his own writing. John Patitucci's last two records, *Communion* and *Songs, Stories and Spirituals* were each nominated for Grammy awards in the "Jazz Composition" category. It appears that *Line By Line* will join that select group.

The disc can be broadly separated into two groups of compositions. The first is a contemporary jazz quartet record which would be a strong piece absent any embellishment. With a band consisting of Mr. Patitucci on basses, Chris Potter in fine voice on tenor saxophone, Adam Rogers on guitars and Brian Blade drumming, listeners should expect that the intellectual and musical quotients will both be high, and that proves to be the case.

The opening composition, "The Root," begins with a tricky 6/8 bass-guitar motif which approaches Leo Kotke territory and quickly fades into a quiet, busy guitar melody and then a melodic bass-guitar lead on the bridge. Interestingly, the only improvised soloing on the piece is an inventive sixty-second exploration over a vamp by Brian Blade on drum set. "Circular," an acoustic trio piece, brings Chick Corea's early work to mind. Mr. Rogers is a thoughtful and musical foil for the bandleader's opening solo, and then steps out for an improvisation which characteristically evokes Pat Metheny. After several minutes, Mr. Patitucci's background has coalesced to a 4/4 walk, although Mr. Blade (as is often the case) does not resort to straight drum time at any point. The tune ends with a dynamic drum solo over a vamp. A later piece, "Folklore," maps some of the trails blazed by Charlie Haden, Michael Brecker and Jack DeJohnette on Mr. Metheny's *80/81*.

Mr. Patitucci's serious side has not impeded his urge to get low and gritty when the music calls

for it. In addressing “Evidence” the band takes a very contemporary approach to one of the most spare, clever “melodies” Thelonious Monk ever wrote. And the bassist steps all the way to the parking lot on his solo version of “Jesus Is On The Mainline” – all tone and no pyrotechnics in sight.

The second, and more unusual, aspect of *Line By Line* is as a presentation of music which carefully but vigorously treads the dividing line between jazz and classical music. The opening signs of this goal appear in the second piece, “Agitato.” Chris Potter and Adam Rogers join in a melody which purposely evokes Baroque counterpoint before opening up into a double-bass solo. The entire quartet shortly finds itself enmeshed in a contrapuntal, melodic, free improvisation, during which Mr. Potter evokes the influences of such masters as Sonny Rollins and Michael Brecker. The aim is clearer still on “Dry September,” which showcases Adam Roger’s finger-picked classical guitar, playing a part which, with the exception of a brief, rubato free improvisation is entirely through-composed. Here again, Brian Blade’s creative approach and dynamic restraint combine to bring about the unexpected. Most drummers would yield to the temptation to offer more and deliver less as a result. The mood continues for “Nana,” a duo for classical guitar and melodic bowed bass. Mr. Patitucci’s song is so graceful that the listener is distracted from the very substantial technical difficulty of the melody.

But it is with the “Theme and Variations for 6-String Bass and Strings” and the “Incarnation/Soaring” medley that the record truly breaks new ground. As unlikely as the combination may sound, the writing for bass guitar and string quintet is breathtaking. The composing stretches well past the hoary syrupy-string-background which listeners usually suffer on those rare occasions when orchestras appear in jazz writing. Here, Mr. Patitucci delivers rich, sumptuous chamber-music pieces with seriously funky bass-guitar solos to boot. As the tempo picks up around seven minutes into the latter piece and gracefully builds over a minute to a brief double-time ostinato before a concluding bass-guitar cadenza you may find yourself suppressing the urge to order tickets for Tanglewood. The disc closes with a solo “Tone Poem” and over an hour has passed in what seems like a few moments.

Line By Line displays rare, perhaps singular, depth and breadth in jazz writing. Where this path takes Mr. Patitucci is an open question, but it is safe to say that listeners seeking beauty and a genre-busting challenge will be along to witness.