

DOWNBEAT

Jazz, Blues & Beyond

At Home With Ahmad Jamal

Jazz Producers A NEW REALITY

Howard Levy

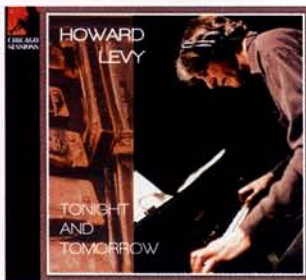
Alone And Together
BALKAN SAMBA RECORDS 003

★★★★

Howard Levy

Tonight And Tomorrow
CHICAGO SESSIONS S01V09

★★★★



Protean is the word for Howard Levy's adaptability and ravenous musical curiosity. A solo record from Levy comes as no surprise, given his resources as a pianist and innovative harmonic virtuosity. Self-produced at home in Evanston, Ill., *Alone And Together* declares inspiration from John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Ella Fitzgerald and ... Gladys Knight.

"Ruminations" and "Ornette In The A.M." are simultaneously improvised duets. Though Levy's piano chops are virile, on the auto-duets he is forced to play more sparsely with his left hand only, resulting in the lovely soliloquy of "Ruminations." On "Ornette In The A.M.," a walking bassline on the keys underpins quicksilver runs on the harp. It is an ambitious double, though at least both instruments are horizontal in approach, even if one deals essentially with breath and tongue control while the other demands digital dexterity.

Equating Levy's Byzantine phraseology on the tin sandwich with Coleman, however, is a stretch. Levy is versed in Latin, bluegrass and Balkan music yet refuses to neglect the harmonica's reputation as the Mississippi saxophone, treating us to country blues, accompanied by foot and hand percussion, and on "Birdhead Blues," a little

stride piano. "Funky Harps" is an all-too-brief hoedown featuring at least three overdubbed harp tracks. Blowing harp into a coffee cup provides concert hall reverb for "Every Time We Say Goodbye," one of a clutch of standards exposing Levy's druthers as a mainstream jazzman. On "One For Dmitri," an improvisation styled after Shostakovich, Levy dabbles convincingly with classical articulations on overdubbed pianos.

In hatching his Chicago Sessions label, producer/engineer Nick Eipers knew early on he wanted to feature the spontaneous genius of Levy. *Tonight And Tomorrow* weighs in with a stellar trio of drummer Ernie Adams and bassist Larry Gray. The original music mandate of Chicago Sessions pushed Levy to reconstitute vintage compositions, such as the title piece (which had its genesis when he was a teenager), and alternates meditative sequences with upbeat

musings. This track features a typically forthright bass solo from Gray leading into vamp sequences laced with Latin structures, ethnic scales and hints of Levy's enthusiasm for McCoy Tyner, which is further suggested by the intense noteplay and chordal architecture on the opening blues.

"Song For Susan" is a dancing waltz with undulating harmony; "Aha" an Afro-Cuban romp kicked along nicely by Adams; "Slanted Samba" an offhanded title for a penetrating multi-hued foray. Given the intricacy of some of the forms, which vary from playful to serious, two improvisations, "Flunky Jazz" and "Triosity," demonstrate the trio's tinder-like interpersonal response and offer respite from prescribed ideas.

—Michael Jackson

Alone And Together: Aguas Quietas; Taking a Chance On Love; Ruminations; Blues Dirge And Shuffle; One For Dmitri; The Nearness Of You; Funkyharp; Birdhead's Blues; Ornette In The A.M.; Every Time We Say Goodbye; Prelude To A Kiss; There Is No Greater Love. (42:53)

Personnel: Howard Levy, harmonica, piano, percussion.

» Ordering info: balkansamba.com

Tonight And Tomorrow: Howard's F# blues; Song For Susan; Chorinho; Floating; Flunky Jazz; Sandi; Aha; Slanted Samba; Triosity; Tonight And Tomorrow. (60:28)

Personnel: Howard Levy, piano, harmonica; Larry Gray, double bass; Ernie Adams, drums.

» Ordering info: chicagosession.com