

Three Plus One

Pianist Steve Colson releases a triumphant trio document—with some vocal help from his wife, Iqua

You could recast an old adage and say that behind every great CD is a great woman, and it would certainly capture the genesis of pianist Adegoke Steve Colson's new disc, *The Untarnished Dream* (Silver Sphinx). It was Colson's wife and frequent collaborator, vocalist Iqua Colson, who pushed the pianist to record his first trio album. "I tend to want to expand my instrumentation," Colson, 60, said from his home in Montclair, N.J., one town away from East Orange, where he grew up and where his parents still reside. "But Iqua kept saying, 'People would like to hear more of what you actually do, and a trio record would be the way to do that.' I kind of resisted, but she spurred it on."

In the process, Iqua essentially talked her way off of center stage. Much of the Colsons' activity these days is focused on their work with one another, and the early planning for this record was focused on that foundation. As Iqua's insistence shifted the emphasis to her husband's own playing, however, her role in the session was necessarily diminished—but not entirely eliminated. As the album's oddly phrased subtitle suggests, the contents include "Music for Trio ... Add Voice," as Colson insisted that

his wife contribute to four of the nine tracks.

Once the decision was made to go the trio route, though, Colson said it was easy to settle on his sidemen. The heavy-duty pairing of bassist Reggie Workman and drummer Andrew Cyrille has worked with Colson in a variety of contexts for more than 20 years. "I know they have big ears," Colson said. "In terms of their musicianship, they operate at that high level where they can hear what you're doing, interpret it and give you back something beyond the bare bones or basic structure of what's presented. If you listen to a piece by Beethoven, there's just something about the way he organizes his thoughts and the material, and you can hear the same quality in various master musicians. They've digested so many different things that they're able to bring out different dimensions you haven't necessarily experienced before."

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Colson unleashes the trio's expansive imagination on a set of music that covers a wide range of styles, from the Monkish hard bop of "Circumstantial" to the cosmic abstraction of "Parallel Universe." Workman seems to find a rich darkness in even the jauntiest of Colson's compositions, lurking in the shadows of the up-tempo "Maybe" and the winsome "Iqua's Waltz." Cyrille brings the muscle, not least on the flinty solo opening "The Untarnished Dream." The leader's own playing possesses a pungent brightness, an edge underlying the elegance—like a switchblade concealed in a tuxedo.

The breadth of the material reflects Colson's membership in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). (He's one of relatively few pianists associated with the renowned Chicago institution.) The AACM's avant-garde experimentation has always absorbed the whole of jazz history, and Colson sees no reason to limit his own scope. "In some ways people get led into listening to a certain type of music, and then there's an assumption that if they were to hear something beyond that, they wouldn't be able to absorb it. It's the same thing that was said of the guys who are now hailed as the founders of bebop. People

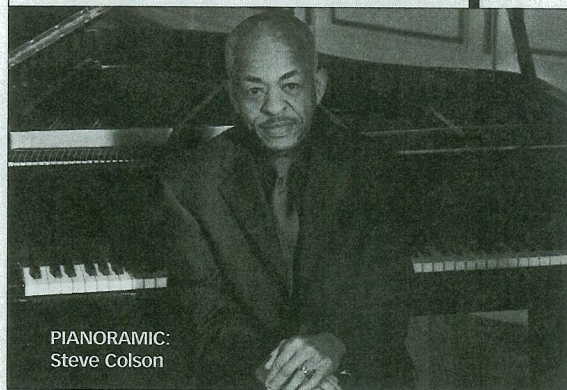
said, 'Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, that's crazy music. Nobody will listen to that.' Or Thelonious Monk: They said, 'The guy can't play piano. He doesn't know what he's doing. Listen to all those wrong notes.' The musicians in the AACM have demonstrated that they're familiar with the earlier forms, and they simply project them forward."

Colson's own vision encompasses decades as well as genres. The jubilant avalanche of "Triumph of the Outcasts" first appeared on the pianist's recently reissued 1980 debut, *Triumph!* (Silver Sphinx), while several other tunes were penned specifically for this recording. And although his discography is fairly sparse, especially when compared with some of his AACM compatriots, Colson still has a wealth of compositions to choose from when assembling an album. "I have a lot of tunes, so I have to sit and meditate on it for a while," he said. "You have to organize them so they have a certain flow."

While Workman and Cyrille are well known for straddling the boundary between inside and outside, Iqua's vocals tread a similar tightrope. She maneuvers through a Sarah Vaughan-ish bop labyrinth on the title track, drifts smokily

through the percussive ritual of "And It Was Set in Ivory," and weaves an intriguing web on "Digression," whose spiraling sound and insistent repetition proceed with a sort of dream logic. "We've played a lot of different kinds of music over the years," Colson explained, "and don't want to get straitjacketed by a label that says we only do this or we only do that. So for this CD, we wanted to make sure we didn't just play music that was free and abstract, but at the same time we didn't want to *not* showcase that. This way you can get a panoramic view."

SHAUN BRADY



PIANORAMIC:
Steve Colson

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