



Frank Kimbrough - Meantime

Musicians:

Frank Kimbrough - Piano

Andrew Zimmerman - Tenor Saxophone

Chris Van Voorst Van Beest - Bass

R.J. Miller - Drums

Riley Mulherkar - Trumpet

“It’s not art unless it has the potential to be a disaster”. That’s a quote attributed to the street artist Banksy. It’s an awfully feel good quote from such a counter-culture guru. It’s a call for audacity but it also carries a note of Horatio Alger. “We can all make art as long as we’re fearless.” Where it gets interesting for me is the intersection of technique and art. To spend your life painstakingly building the scaffolding of your craft, and then to really let go and fall every time. That’s the guiding light of improvised music.

The classic Kurt Weil composition “**Alabama Song**” kicks off this record. I’m always interested in the way a rhythm section musician leads a group with horns. You can step in front and trail-blaze or you can leave space in the music to let the musicians lean in. It’s the difference between being a “front man” and being a leader. This piece is such a great vehicle for presenting Andrew Zimmerman’s tone. Andrew takes the melody at face value, playing it pure. To play a melody simply and yet to create something unique in the world is perhaps the greatest of musical gifts. Frank’s solo is an extension of that melody. In fact nowhere on this record, to my ears, do any of the musicians lose sight of the melodic framework of the compositions. This music is not about using these tunes as a vehicle for self-expression but rather allowing the tune to express itself through the player. Neat trick.

“**Laughing at Gravity**” is one of a trio of compositions that Frank wrote for this record. He described to me a late night in November with silence seeping through the walls of his apartment from his neighborhood in Queens. Frank sat down with one sheet of music paper at the dining room table and sketched out “Laughing at Gravity,” “Elegy for PM” and “Meantime” in a half hour hit of inspiration. “Laughing” is a gospel-tinged tune flipping from a vamping “A” section to a dancing melodic bridge. Frank cuts out at the beginning of Andrew’s solo and lets him pick up a head of steam before sliding back into the groove.

“**Twenty Bars**” is a song that Frank recorded on his first album “Lonely Woman,” for

Mapleshade. It's an extended blues form and has a timeless feel to it. The way drummer, RJ Miller plays around the time is stunning. To swing that hard while never having to make anything explicit is reminiscent of the great Paul Motian.

The great pianist and composer Andrew Hill wrote "**Laverne**" for his wife. Frank and Andrew were good friends and Andrew's music has always claimed a deep place in Frank's heart. "A lot of Andrew's music is thought of often as being quite dark and complicated, you know, these churning rhythms... but this tune is just a song and it's a very happy song, and I've always liked it." Riley Mulherkar joins on trumpet for the first time on this track. Riley was getting his masters at Juilliard where Frank teaches and Frank invited him last minute to sit in on a couple of tunes. Riley has a round sound and mature concept that belies his youth.

Closing out the first side is "**Elegy for P.M.**" This is maybe my favorite Kimbrough composition. The clarity of the melody cloaks so much that digs deep. I love Chris Van Voorst Van Beest's phrasing behind Frank's solo, RJ's refusal to play the easy answer... Zimmerman and Frank have such chemistry... "I thought Andrew played my music really, really well. You know, he's playing what I'm hearing, 'cause you can't write what you hear. You can do your best but the inflection, the phrasing, the interpretation of the music, even with all the notes there, that cannot be right, but with Andrew it was perfect."

"**Katonah**" opens up side two with a jolt of energy. From the first hit of the melody to the last note there is a sustained intensity that feels effortless. Riley opens up for a chorus using the full timbre of the horn and Andrew's cool response builds in intensity and then Frank burns his solo right through the last chorus of the melody.

Rather than open up the form for traditional solos, "**Meantime**," continually cycles through a deceptively simple Kimbrough melody. There's just enough harmony to hang something beautiful on. Tension and release, never predictable, and always with the carefully chosen tone trumping the paroxysm of notes.

"**Four by Four**," is another tune from Frank's back catalogue. It's got a touch of Monk in there, but in its execution and harmonic depth it's pure Kimbrough. Andrew tackles the trickier changes with aplomb. I love the interaction behind Zimmerman's solo between Frank, Chris and RJ. Always searching, never acquiescent, always listening and reactive.

Frank has a gift for finding under appreciated classics. The record closes with the Harold Arlen standard "**Last Night When We Were Young**." How this song is not covered more often is a mystery. There is nowhere more vulnerable in improvised music than in melody and Riley's trumpet shows a depth that marks him as a leading young talent. There is great value within the swirling eddies of cacophony and rhythmic multiplicities but one can find places to hide in there. The well formed improvised melodic statement is the most exposed and unprotected place on the bandstand and because of this, it can shoulder the most emotional weight. This quintet dances on the edge of catastrophe.

- Elan Mehler