



Steve Cardenas - Charlie & Paul

Musicians:

Steve Cardenas - Guitar

Loren Stillman - Alto Saxophone

Thomas Morgan - Bass

Matt Wilson - Drums

It's easy enough to call them giants, those artists that are enshrined in the collective imaginations as having achieved greatness. I think it's simple to describe people like Charlie Haden and Paul Motian as "genius" or "towering" or even "talented" because the truth might be a little scarier. What if the great artists are simply the ones whose expression resonates because of its honesty? Where does that leave the rest of us when someone can say something that is so simple and true that it endures eternally?

There's so much personality in the music of Charlie and Paul. Not in the reductive meaning of the word implying idiosyncrasy or identifiable devices, rather that listening to their music gives you a palpable sense of having known the artist. This is how an artist can enter a pantheon of sorts. Not through building giant edifices of achievement but by pouring so much of oneself into the music that the music reflects the person. I never knew Paul Motian or Charlie Haden, but I feel like I did. Their music has changed the context of my surroundings. Musicians like Charlie and Paul built the world we live in.

The musicians on this record did know Charlie and Paul. Leader, Steve Cardenas played in Paul Motian's band for 14 years and Charlie Haden's for 10. Loren Stillman also played long tenures with both. Matt Wilson worked extensively with Charlie and Thomas Morgan was Paul Motian's first call bassist for over a decade. There's little that connects the compositional style of Charlie and Paul. Maybe there's more hard edges and quick turns in the music of Motian. Even Charlie's more cutting pieces like "Pocket Full of Cherry" sound like lullabies. But what draws them together, to my ears, is a certainty of melodic purpose and a child like wonder and freshness. Songs that sound discovered instead of composed.

Many of the songs on this record don't have traditional harmonic frameworks to improvise over. Rather, the entire song is hung off of the central melodic idea. There's such looseness and room to breathe in these pieces. I love the way that the band speaks together on the opening track. It takes all of three seconds to establish a unique color. These musicians have so much clarity in their tone and approach. I'm resisting giving a

play by play account of each song, but I can't help also bringing attention to the improvised section on Haden's "La Pasionaria". The melody, simple and true, tapers off and Thomas Morgan's bass is left alone. Each member of the band enters during Thomas's unstructured solo, Matt first with mallets, then Loren and Steve. What's remarkable is that Thomas doesn't have to step back to make space for these other soloists. There isn't the common give and take as one soloist recedes to let someone else shine. Everyone is using their own voice to say the same thing and it builds so naturally that all the effort of a group improvisation is invisible, as it should be.

Steve Cardenas has crafted a tribute to Charlie and Paul in not just the interpretation of their compositions but the level of attention and focus that seems to shimmer off the music. It feels like Charlie and Paul are there in every improvised moment. Steve, Loren, Thomas and Matt have made a record of such sustained commitment and clarity that it takes my breath away. Of course the greatest tribute to such singular artists is to speak your own truth.

- Elan Mehler