

LARRY KARUSH

Art of the Improviser

Jazz as Worldly Window . . .

As much as jazz has developed its own highly codified, intricate language, it can also be viewed as an opening, a way of looking at music which invites the willing traveller into expansive thinking. Such is the enlightened path on Larry Karush's solo piano recording, a cogent and probing suite which easily shifts from idioms as seemingly disparate as bluegrass to stride to twentieth century art music.

Make no mistake: Karush has jazz spirit encoded deep in his DNA, as conveyed in the unmistakable imprint of his swing, the strong improvisational instincts, and his harmonic patina. But there is also a quality of organic restlessness, keeping him from heading straight down the middle of any given musical attitude. The upshot is a musical journey of a project, as surprising in its twists and turns as it is perfect logical on its own linguistic terms.

It's a paradox, true, like most good art. Karush is an exacting every-note-in-place player, of no uncertain technical focus, but one who also loves the thrill and the payoff of a good search. That much is resoundingly clear on this project.

An artist with long-standing associations in non-western and classical realms as well as in jazz, Karush is well-prepared for a life of willful idiom-blurring. He has worked with musicians such as John Abercrombie, Jane Ira Bloom, and Oregon, as well as with Steve Reich, on his epochal 1976 recording *Music for 18 Musicians* recording for ECM, a landmark event in the popularization of minimalism. In recent years, Karush has pursued a blend of musics, with roots in

jazz and world traditions, with the trio known as MOKAVE, alongside bassist Glenn Moore and percussionist Glen Velez. Together, they have made a coherent but also free-ranging sound, off to the side of jazz in the conventional sense, with ears open to the world.

This album is something else again. Solo piano is a special contextual challenge, an opportunity to either peer deep into one's own aesthetic reflective pool, or else to wander aimlessly through the gardens of one's understanding. Here, Karush opts for the former, with a programme that says much about the state of his art, and also something about the musical environment around him.

Many of these pieces are touchstones in the evolution of Karush's own music over the past 25 years, as well as the music that has affected him. Jazz piano history comes to bear, naturally, in such tunes as *L's P's*, inspired by the tune *Lenny's Pennies*, by Lenny Tristano – another cerebral pianist with gut feeling and a propulsive way with a line. That certain mixture of intellect and intuition returns on *The Nine Beat Boogie*, the soulful energy of which nearly allows us to forget its odd meter. *Meditation*, one of a series of pieces begun in the '70s, is a poignant, contemplative vehicle, subject to improvisational transformation of structure, like most of Karush's compositions.

Karush steps out of standard pianistic practice for the first piece, *Banjo Variations*, which emulates the bracing clarity of clawhammer banjo picking, with precision-gear finger work on the keys. Bluegrass fairly quickly yields to other musical directions, including ragtime, shades of classicism, and an Indonesian-tinged passage, all of which hinge on an upbeat rhythmic emphasis.

Folk tradition returns with *Country*, another older tune revisited in a new form. Here, ideas and phrases suggesting gospel as much as C&W are subjected to radical shifts of tonality, in dissonant relationships that alter the very emotional character of the piece, turning it dark and pensive.

But along comes the jaunty, bouncing left hand of *Variations on a Theme by James P. Johnson* to brighten the musical road. Karush clearly has affection for the joyous passions and also the technical intricacies of early jazz piano models, but his modern mind can't help but rear its head. These variations manage to be both archival and irreverent, stepping into some decidedly post-Johnson inventions, where fierce rhythmic syncopations and harmonic dervish dancing preside. Then the stride factor returns, like a stubborn good mood.

As a final benediction, Karush offers *Reach*, an emotive and ultimately peaceful denouement to the album, dedicated to his late father. To hear the pianist describe it, "performing this piece transforms sadness and anger at the death of a loved one into the act of sending them energy and love."

Art of the Improviser is an inspired – even visionary – statement from a pianist who has steadfastly developed his musical voice, in a fruitful margin off the jazz mainstream.

To call Karush a pianist-deserving-wider-recognition is an understatement: it may have something to do with what appears, from the outside, to be a refusal to settle down into an established musical channel, a hopeless eclecticism.

From another perspective, we could call his musical venture a matter of hope-filled eclecticism, making coherent his personal blend of musics from different cultural corners. This album is all over the map, in the best possible sense.

Josef Woodard, jazz writer, June, 1998
– contributor to *LA Times, Down Beat, Jazz Times, Jazziz, etc.*

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