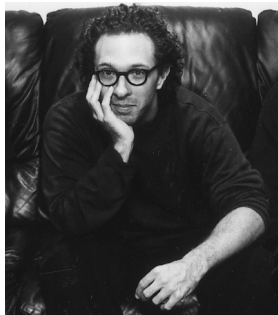


the
Anthony
Wilson **trio**



our gang



Much of Anthony Wilson's reputation, remarkable for one still in his early 30s, rests on his writing abilities. A triple-threat composer with a unique ear for melody, harmony and rhythm, Wilson's charts for his celebrated nine-piece ensemble are strongly grounded in the jazz tradition even as they maintain a thoroughly modern, forward-looking perspective.

His skills have won him a slew of honors: the Thelonious Monk International Composers' Competition in 1995, a Grammy nomination for Best Large Jazz Ensemble Performance in 1997, The Gil Evans Fellowship in composition from the International Association of Jazz Educators in 1999, top-ranking (tied with Dave Douglas) in the composers deserving wider recognition category in *Downbeat* magazine's 2000 International Critics' Poll.

But composition is only half the Wilson story. Anyone who has seen him perform, whether with his incisive nonet, as a member of the orchestra led by his father, distinguished bandleader Gerald Wilson, or in various gigs with saxophonists Bennie Wallace and Ernie Watts, trumpeter Marcus Printup, singer Madeleine Peyroux and others, know that he's also a smart, sensitive guitarist, one who brings the same ear for tradition, melody and harmony to his instrument that he brings to his writing.

The continued pursuit of those instrumental abilities led to the formation of this organ trio. "I

got an opportunity back in 1999 to do a regular gig at the Lucky 7 club in Hollywood," says L.A. native Wilson, "but it was impossible to bring in the full nonet on a weekly basis. So I was trying to think of something that might be fun to do, something that would allow me to sink my teeth into my playing.

"I'd been listening to a lot of (late Philadelphia-based organist) Bill Doggett's recordings and (late saxophonist) Willis Jackson albums with (organist) Jack McDuff and Bill Jennings on guitar and I really liked this kind of Harlem barroom sound. So I thought, 'let's put together an organ trio and play some music in this older groove style.'"

Wilson enlisted organist Joe Bagg, who had subbed in Wilson's nonet first for pianist Brad Mehldau and later for keyboardist Donald Vega. Bagg recommended drummer Mark Ferber, an old friend with whom he had a particularly symbiotic musical relationship. The threesome set up shop at the Lucky 7 for several months and added trips to Yoshi's jazz club in Oakland and Kuumbwa Jazz Center in Santa Cruz. As it worked, the group began to take on a different identity.

"I was thinking along traditional, stylistic lines when we started out," says Wilson. "But then the sound started to evolve. We started doing original tunes and the group just took on a life of its own."

Wilson's expansive taste in music began to shape the group's direction. His approach to the nonet,

with its characteristic use of harmony and melody, began to surface in his composing for trio as well as in the standard numbers he chose to play.

"At the beginning, my goal was just to get back in touch with my playing. I'd spent all this time scoring for nonet, building a book of some 30 numbers, and that took a lot of time away from my playing. Not that my playing had suffered, but I was longing to just play without thinking about blending in with the horn players, or conducting or worrying about what my part was."

While the trio has become a vehicle for Wilson's guitar as well as Bagg's tasteful organ work and the colorful drumming of Ferber, its personality is based on the unique, often complex nature of the music it performs. As is so often true in the jazz world, the roots of the trio's sound can be found in its varied influences.

"When we began picking out tunes to do, we looked for groovers that fit squarely into the organ tradition," Wilson recalled. "However, there's a temptation to rely too much on that with organ trios because it's so prevalent and popular. People naturally associate the 12-bar blues and gritty sound with organ trios."

"Two trios we listen to a lot are (the late organist) Larry Young's with (late guitarist) Grant Green and (drummer) Elvin Jones and (organist) Larry Goldings' trio. Both are good models because

they don't stick to the usual formula. There's all kinds of different spirit and feeling in what they do. Larry Young was so free with the rhythms he used. It's not that cliché organ trio sound."

You need to go no further than this disc's title tune to hear how "Our Gang" varies, as Wilson puts it, from the usual formula. Its texture is less about grits and more about gravy. Guitar and organ make for a single satisfying flavor as they harmonize. The drums favor propulsion over back beat. While there's plenty of burn in Wilson's solo, the mood remains cool.

Wilson says the title came some time after "Our Gang" was written. "The tune came out quickly, in an hour or two, and all in one piece. When I listened to it there was a phrase at the end of the A section that sounded reminiscent of something but I couldn't place it. It took me the longest time to figure it out. Then I realized what it sounded like. I'd watch a lot of *Our Gang* when I was young. I loved those kids."

The other Wilson compositions on the recording are equally rich and satisfying. The graceful "Britta's Blues" was written for Wilson's current belle and reflects her personality. "I wrote it shortly after meeting her," Wilson confides. "She's a beautiful, spiritual person and a great friend. It's simply a love song dedicated to her."

The 7/4 "Time Flies" is an exercise in speed and technical perfection that doesn't lack in content. "I



hear a lot of players do things that are very complex but don't always say much. It's important, even if a song has a lot of changes, that it says something and not just be complex. A tune like "Time Flies" has to be coherent, has to tell a story, or it doesn't interest me."

The standards here reflect both the harmonic and melodic interest as well as the narrative quality that Wilson favors. Frank Loesser's "Luck Be a Lady" contains the complexity, variety and rhythmic malleability that Wilson strives for in his own work. And they have something to say.

"Luck Be A Lady" is a prime example because it changes keys in each section. It's great to play over because of the logical progressions. The way it comes together, it just makes so much sense."

The album's most unexpected number is the John Lennon-Paul McCartney tune "I Want You."

"I was wary of doing it because it's been a trend lately for guys of my generation to record pop or rock tunes. A lot of that music just doesn't warrant it. They vamp and they end. But ('I Want You') lends itself well to jazz improvisation, it has some different feels to it and it has a bluey atmosphere that lends itself well to the trio."

Wilson says he's not an elitist and admires music from a variety of sources. "I try not to be too literal about my influences. I like rock, pop, country all kinds of things, as long as I'm able to integrate it in to who I am and not just use it as a gimmick."

Nor does Our Gang shy away from the type of music most associated with the organ trio tradition. "Chitlins con Carne", written by master guitarist Kenny Burrell (who's in charge of the UCLA Jazz Studies department where Wilson is an instructor) gives the threesome a chance to simply groove. It's heard on Burrell's classic 1963 recording *Midnight Blue*.

"'Chitlins con Carne' is one of the first tunes we ever played as a trio and it still comes out different every time we do it. It has that certain voicing that Kenny plays, the typical rich, thick Kenny Burrell chords that I love."

Organist Bagg's contribution, "Roadtrip," also makes use of a well-traveled groove. "This is a tune we learned on the spot," says Wilson, "I like the melody, the feeling and the fact that it was spontaneous. Like a lot of the tunes on the disc, it was done in one take."

The program closes with Duke Ellington's much loved "Prelude To A Kiss." "We didn't have any really well-known standards on the album," Wilson explains, "No 'Body and Soul,' no 'How High the Moon.' And this is just an incredibly beautiful tune, they way it comes out of the bridge, the harmony, that melody. It was the last tune we recorded at the session."

Wilson emphasizes the importance of Bagg and Ferber to his approach. "Joe is an incredibly respon-

sive improviser. He takes in whatever musical information is coming up around him, processes it quickly and responds meaningfully. Nothing gets by him."

Bagg grew up in Southern California, went to school at Rutgers where he studied with respected pianist Kenny Barron, then returned to California where, he says, he was "sucked into the local jazz vortex." He has worked with saxophonists Ralph Moore, Charles McPherson and Arthur Blythe, trumpeter Brian Lynch and drummer Gerry Gibbs. Like Wilson, he cites organists Young and Goldings as influences, as well as Jimmy Smith, Lonnie Smith and Dan Wall.

Drummer Ferber studied drums with Billy Higgins at UCLA (where Ferber also earned a degree in geography). Before moving to New York in 2000 to broaden his musical horizons, Ferber amassed a lengthy list of west coast credits that included pianist Billy Childs, saxophonist Bud Shank and the Los Angeles Jazz Quartet.

"Mark is like a sponge," says Wilson. "He's listened to so much music and soaked up everything, but never sounds like he's copying anyone. He's got a buoyancy and lightness to his playing and he's one of the few drummers who can play melodically. He always keeps the music moving forward."

Wilson's own play on Our Gang puts him in the first rank of guitarists. He is at once deadly serious and playfully inventive. Long improvised lines ex-

plode with unexpected chords or make startling turns. His comping is deep, meaningful and more leading than an attorney's line of questioning. From a listen to Our Gang, it's apparent that Wilson's time with the trio has spurred him to new heights of musicianship both as a player and composer.

"Working in the trio has not only put me more in touch with my guitar," says Wilson, "but with my writing" too. Playing puts you in touch with what you want to convey as far as melodic and harmonic content and that carries over to composing. Before the trio, I almost always used the piano when I was composing. Now, I'll write things for the nonet on the guitar."

When asked what the most important lesson he learned from his father, the one-time Jimmie Lunceford trumpeter who has been one of the west coast's most important composers and bandleaders for a half-century, Wilson gets philosophical.

"I learned so much about music from him but the central thing he showed me is that learning to be your own man, to have your own voice, that ends up being the biggest lesson. All the other technical stuff is less important."

In Anthony Wilson's case, it's a lesson well-learned.

—Bill Kohlhaase, Contributing Jazz Writer,
Los Angeles Times



- 1. Our Gang**
(Anthony Wilson) Goat Hill Music, BMI 8:38
- 2. Chitlins Con Carne**
(Kenny Burrell) Elliott Music, ASCAP 7:23
- 3. Britta's Blues**
(Anthony Wilson) Goat Hill Music, BMI 7:24
- 4. Time Flies**
(Anthony Wilson) Goat Hill Music, BMI 7:46
- 5. Road Trip**
(Joe Bagg) Joe Bagg Music, BMI 4:56
- 6. Luck Be A Lady**
(Frank Loesser) Frank Music Group, ASCAP 5:52
- 7. I Want You (She's So Heavy)**
(Lennon/McCartney) Sony/ATV Songs Lic, BMI 9:44
- 8. Prelude To A Kiss**
(Ellington/Mills) Duke Ellington Music,
EMI Mills Music, ASCAP 6:59

Executive Production by:
Ying Tan and Sebastian Koh

Produced by:
Joe Harley

Anthony Wilson: guitar
Joe Bagg: Hammond B-3
Mark Ferber: drums

Anthony Wilson uses Clark amplifiers.

Visit Anthony Wilson on the web at:
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"Special thanks to Joe Bagg & Mark Ferber
for your friendship and your beautiful
playing; to Joe Harley, Mike Ross, and
Ying Tan for your support and good humor
in the studio, and for such exquisite
recorded sound; and to Bernie Grundman
for your mastering expertise.

Thanks also to my mother, my father, Minnie
Leberman, Britta Bocala, Stuart Gordon,
Nancy Meyer, Jeffrey Marsh, James Orr, all
my friends, all my musical colleagues, and all
my students."

— Anthony Wilson



Executive Producer: Ying Tan
Produced by: Joe Harley

Engineered by: Michael C. Ross at Cello Studios, Hollywood, CA December 7 & 8, 2000

Assistant Engineer: Darren Morra

Mastered by: Bernie Grundman using the Sony Direct Stream Digital™ System

**Recorder: Sony Direct Stream Digital™ System with custom engineered ADCs
and DACs by Ed Meitner, EMM Labs.**

Microphones: AKG C-12, C-12A, Sony C-55p, Neumann M-50, U-47FET, Sennheiser 441, Shure SM 7

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