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Uri Caine Calibrated Thickness

BY WILL LAYMAN
(/ARCHIVE/CONTRIBUTOR/18)
11 November 2016

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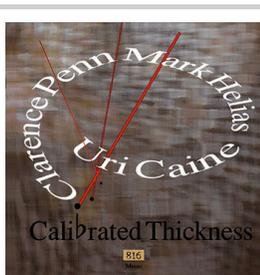


THE INCREDIBLY ECLECTIC JAZZ PIANIST OFFERS A SERIES OF SHORT SONGS THAT CONSISTENTLY DAZZLE.

Uri Caine performs in so many varied contexts — from solo piano to electronic contexts to classical ensembles with choral elements — that you’re excused if you don’t naturally think of him in that most common of jazz piano groups: the trio. In fact, he is a burning example of a superb trio pianist, and *Blue Wail* from 1999 has long been the Caine recording that most often makes it back onto my playlist.

Calibrated Thickness is in many ways the successor to *Blue Wail*: an aggressive, rhythmic, explosive recording that consists of 15 quick performances that come across as a set of quick jabs of creativity that work across a wide range of styles. The trio itself is different, with Mark Helias on bass and Clarence Penn on drums, but the tremendous momentum of the music connects the albums in the best way.

The longest tracks on *Calibrated Thickness* are just under seven minutes, but most are only three or four minutes of blissful invention. The result is a landscape



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CALIBRATED THICKNESS
(816 MUSIC)
US: 12 AUG 2016
UK: 12 AUG 2016

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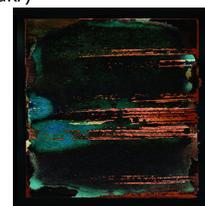
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of piano-bass-drums (with three tracks that add Kirk Knufke's wise, tart cornet) that rolls in waves across different styles, while each mutation of the trio's sound is passionate and original with mere nods to antecedents. Your ears come away with a deep respect for the form, for the concept of the jazz piano trio, and how much music it can assimilate.

ARTISTTERM=URI•CAINE)

"Manhatta" launches the trio out of a swinging cannon. Caine is a powerful pianist with a big, crashing left hand when he needs it, and the groove is ferocious with an attack that rumbles on the bottom and swirls at the top, reminiscent of McCoy Tyner. Caine moves his improvised melodies up and down his instrument's range very effectively, pulling out long lines of interest, playing them in chiming octaves in the top registers for emphasis or pushing even harder in dense block chords. Penn gets in a few passages where he daringly shifts meter and tempo even though he is trading measures with the band and then, *whoosh*, the tune ends. It is exhilarating.

The shift from there is into equally compelling but largely abstract territory, as "Woke Up This Morning" is a sparky dollop of freedom, with Caine and Helias tossing around melodic ideas while Penn continually invents beneath them, no melody in sight — but only for 2:26. The third tune, "Icicles", begins with a beautiful slice of musical impressionism as piano and percussion simulate light flickering through ice. And then "Submission" adds Knufke for a knotty modern theme that is like a cubist puzzle to be solved, even more briefly executed — Caine leaping about the form as the cornet sticks to the line and then vice versa.

Those first four tunes take only 12 minutes to experience, yet you've traveled a huge distance in terms of jazz styles. Caine and his compositions are truly pan-stylistic, and his trio proves that it can go anywhere on short notice. "Golem", which follows, is almost seven minutes long, and it moves episodically from swing to free to an angular modernity all within one structure. Caine couldn't be clearer in waving the flag of his eclecticism.

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The remainder of *Calibrated Thickness* proceeds similarly, but with new tricks up the trio's sleeve. "Bleeding Heart" and "He Said She" are rhapsodic ballads, with lyrical exploration that favorably compares to the work of Brad Mehldau and Keith Jarrett. "Night Wrestler" is dense modern jazz that uses hooky motifs and brilliant harmony in a manner that suggests your favorite Wayne Shorter tune ... performed by Herbie Hancock. "Shadow of a Doubt" is also a ballad, but with Knufke in the Miles Davis role, harkening back to those brilliant mid-'60s sessions for *Miles Smiles* and *Neffertiti*.

The trio works up a playful wheel-within-a-wheel action on "Time in Between" and swings hard again on "Sticks and Stones". "Scatterbrain Suite" is another episodic showcase that is longer but moves swiftly from section to section. The album, too, keeps revolving and shifting, never staying in one place too long.

Not that Uri Caine is an artist suffering from musical Attention Deficit Disorder. Over the course of a long career — spent almost entirely making music beyond the reach of any real commercial success — Caine has been consistent, but consistently eclectic.

Calibrate Thickness may use a limited instrumentation, but it displays the leader's

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"It's less about participating in the scene and the who's who and more about leaving something for myself when I'm old, to say that I did this for the sake of learning and my brain, rather than the sake of going out and selling out."

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voracious appetite for variation and passion. Sure, I love hearing Caine work with a DJ or a gospel singer, with a hot horn section or a sizzling electric bassist. But even with just this fiery trio, Caine is a master of a half-dozen styles.

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CALIBRATED THICKNESS

Rating: ★★★★★★★★



Will Layman is a writer, teacher and musician living in the Washington, DC area. He is a contributor to National Public Radio and frequently appears as a guest on WNYC's "Soundcheck" as a jazz critic. He plays both funk and jazz in the bars and clubs in and near the nation's capital. His fiction and humor appear in print and online.

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