

HIGHNOTE
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CYRUS CHESTNUT

ERIC WHEELER
CHRIS BECK

Kaleidoscope



CYRUS CHESTNUT

PIANO

ERIC WHEELER

BASS (EXCEPT TRACKS 7 & 13)

CHRIS BECK

DRUMS (EXCEPT TRACKS 7 & 13)

- 1 **Golliwog's Cakewalk** 5:02
- 2 **Darn That Dream** 5:06
- 3 **Gymnopedie No. 1** 6:15
- 4 **Entre cloches** 5:44
- 5 **Jimbo's Lullaby** 5:26
- 6 **Father Time** 5:29
- 7 **Lord I Want to Be a Christian** 4:28
- 8 **Son binocle** 4:04
- 9 **Smoke on the Water** 4:33
- 10 **Gnossienne No. 1** 6:57
- 11 **Gymnopedie No. 3** 4:07
- 12 **Turkish Rondo** 3:37
- 13 **Prayer for Claudine** 5:13

Whether you're a hardcore fan or just a casual dropper-in to his music, this album is not the Cyrus Chestnut you know. At least, not the one you think you know.

"One thing that's often said about me is 'Oh, he's soulful, he's swinging, he plays this gospel stuff,'" Chestnut says. "Please don't get me wrong—I appreciate that. But that's not all that's in me."

That's the statement Kaleidoscope intends to make. Chestnut is moving in directions that are new to our perceptions of him, but have always been a part of his development. There are certain touchstones that remain in place: Chestnut's love of classic swing and groove; the American songbook ("Darn That Dream," interpolated with another familiar tune in the piano solo); a hymn ("Lord, I Want to Be a Christian") and a hymn-like original ("Prayer for Claudine," written in memory of his dear friend Claudine Rucker). Yes, these pieces say, *I am still all of those things you knew me to be. But I am also these other things that you didn't.*

"Smoke on the Water," for example, is maybe the last thing we'd ever expect out of Cyrus Chestnut. In fact, it's the first song he ever played as a professional musician. Last year, while playing in Melbourne Australia with his trio (bassist Eric Wheeler and drummer Chris Beck,

who also accompany him on this album) he trotted it out on a whim; the crowd loved it. The on-the-nose power chords on the intro at first seem tongue-in-cheek (there's definitely an element of shock value); soon, though, Chestnut's complex harmonies and high drama betray his sincere exploration of the hard-rock staple.

The bulk of the recording comprises pieces from the classical canon. These are somewhat less unexpected, considering that Chestnut has trodden this path before (on his 2014 Venus release *Moonlight Sonata: Swingin' Classics*). But that was a deliberate novelty, taking on—ahem—chestnuts from Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, and Chopin. On Kaleidoscope, Chestnut had much more serious intentions: "I wanted some things that are just a little bit different."

An exception is made for Mozart's celebrated "Turkish Rondo," from his Sonata #11. But if it's a conventional choice, Chestnut's treatment of it is not. Wheeler, Beck, and he reconfigure the rhythm for each of the rondo's parts: samba for the A section, march for the B, and a combination of both those beats with driving swing for the improvisation section (which includes a fierce traded-fours face-off between Chestnut and Beck.)

Erik Satie is the most represented composer here, with four pieces.

Chestnut has been conducting a deep study of his music, especially the organic phrases and forms. Chestnut experimented with ways of integrating improvisation with the same organic feel. It succeeds to beautiful effect on Satie's most famous piece "Gymnopédie #1" (which Chestnut renders exquisitely) and its moodier sibling, "#3." He is equally sumptuous on the less well known "Gnossienne #1" and "Son binocle," translating the latter into a light bossa.

Chestnut also takes on the twin pillars of impressionism (and Satie's contemporaries), Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. Ravel's "Entre cloches," written for two pianists but easily adjusted to one (or anyway, one with Chestnut's awesome reach and technique), uses the same habanera rhythms Jelly Roll Morton called "the Spanish tinge" that flavored New Orleans jazz.

Debussy contributes two parts of his piano suite Children's Corner. "Golliwog's Cakewalk" is also a natural fit for jazz, based as it is on the ur-swing rhythms of early 20th-century cakewalks and ragtime. It's a reminder, too, that the European tradition was as inspired by the African American folk forms that form jazz's core as jazz musicians like Chestnut are by the European composers. But the trio's interpretation of the

not-at-all-diasporic "Jimbo's Lullaby" is even more powerfully adapted, both because of Chestnut's licks (channeling in some spots jazz's own impressionist pillar, Bill Evans) and because of the howling blues bass intro from Wheeler.

In his original composition "Father Time," Chestnut strongly echoes Satie in his stately harmonies and pacific approach to rhythm and space. Its primary influence, however, was yet another source: William Shakespeare. Commissioned by the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., for a performance at their annual gala, Chestnut perused the sonnets and was moved by one to start reflecting on the passage of time. That was the origin of its tick-tock ostinato.

Satie, Deep Purple, the church, Shakespeare: To quote another poet, Cyrus Chestnut contains multitudes.

"Music for me is about life: what I see, what I feel, what I hear, how I react," he says. "I'm inspired by history; I'm inspired by musicians; a variety of different outlets. I guess you can say a kaleidoscope."

For the first time, the album of that name puts all of Chestnut's patterns and colors on vivid display.

—Michael J. West

All arrangements by Cyrus Chestnut

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