

JO ALLEN TOYS/DIE DREAMING



SAVANT

1 YOU'RE MY THRILL 9.32

(J. GORNEY-S. CLARE) GORNEY MUSIC/BOURNE CO./ASCAP

2 THE G THING 6.41

3 DIE DREAMING 5.57

4 RED LABEL 6.29

(P. LIN) LINTET MUSIC/BMI

5 TOYS 4.15

6 I SHOULD CARE 5.09

(A. STORDAHL-P. WESTON-S. CAHN) HANOVER MUSIC CORP./CAHN MUSIC/STORDAHL MUSIC PUBL./ASCAP

7 ELEGUA (THE TRICKSTER) 6.59

ALL COMPOSITIONS BY JD ALLEN/HOUSE OF EUGENE/BMI

UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

JD ALLEN TENOR SAXOPHONE IAN KENSELAAR BASS NIC CACIOPPO DRUMS

PRODUCED BY JD ALLEN

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER BARNEY FIELDS

RECORDED AT SAMURAI HOTEL RECORDING STUDIO, ASTORIA, NY ON JANUARY 2, 2020

ENGINEERED, MIXED AND MASTERED BY MIKE MARCIANO

ASSISTANT ENGINEER MAX ROSS

JD Allen plays Yanigasawa saxophones, Vandoren V16 Reeds and a JodyJazz Giant 8 Mouthpiece

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JD Allen's saxophone glows. Whether he's pacing the floor of a tiny Brooklyn bar, standing onstage at the Jazz Gallery in Manhattan, or hard at work in the big room at the Samurai Hotel recording studio in Queens, the horn's polished curves seem to reflect every glimmer of light in the room, turning itself and its owner into a flare in the darkness.

The sound of that gleaming horn is instantly recognizable, unique but familiar. It cries out from the dark in the voice of ancestral memory, summoning echoes of John Coltrane, Joe Henderson, David Murray, Sonny Rollins, David S. Ware and all the legendary men of the African-American tenor sax tradition.

Allen's melodies are short, memorable phrases, different every time but always recognizable as the product of a focused creative mind. His solos go as far afield as the music requires, but are guided and shaped by a fierce discipline. There are no unimportant notes here, no filler phrases, no mere demonstrations of finger dexterity to allow the player to catch a mental breath and regroup.

This is Allen's fourteenth album as a leader, his second with his current trio of bassist Ian Kenselaar and drummer Nic Cacioppo. Its predecessor, *Barracoön* (Savant SCD 2177), was his most unfettered recording to date; the tunes were barely sketches, the better to allow raw emotion to flow through the horn. By contrast, *Toys (Die Dreaming)* combines four new compositions with two standards and a piece borrowed from a friend, and makes them into a cohesive 45-minute statement of purpose.

The album begins with a version of the standard "You're My Thrill." The bass and drums set the pace before Allen comes in, head bobbing, throwing patient, carefully aimed punches. Kenselaar has the wide-open ears of a player in his twenties, and a bouncing, swaying groove like a boxer shifting from foot to foot, and Cacioppo, whose inspirations run the gamut from Papa Jo Jones to Milford Graves, has a self-possession behind the kit that's assertive, even dominant, but always serves the music.

Two Allen originals, "The G Thing" and "Die Dreaming" are next. The former is a ballad that combines a Coltrane-ish cry with a swooningly romantic melody like a slow dance at a wedding, while the latter struts as much as it swings. Allen dips deep into the tenor's lower register, coming up with a roar like an alligator rising from the depths of a swamp.

"Red Label" is a barroom blues written by trombonist Peter Lin; Allen, Kenselaar and Cacioppo first recorded it on Lin's 2019 album *New Age Old Ways*. It has a late-night, almost tawdry feel much different from the earlier recording, which had a hushed quality, with the drummer keeping minimalist time using brushes. Here, he's driving the trio hard, hammering out fierce rolls and a rhythm that thrusts its hips at you, half seduction, half threat.

"Toys" is an unsettling mood piece, a crawling ballad on which Allen states a phrase three times, never letting it fully resolve, and leaves the rhythm section to march along without him for long stretches. Though the piece has vast amounts of empty space, no one ever chooses to fill it with a solo. Thus, the fact that it's one of the two title tracks is a statement in itself.

The penultimate piece, a version of the standard "I Should Care," is quieter still. It's stripped to the bone, with Allen climbing down from the peaks of the tenor's upper register to the depths of the lower, and Kenselaar and Cacioppo staying nearly silent, as though afraid to break his concentration.

"Elegua (the trickster)" ends the album with an explosion. It begins with a titanic, but contained drum solo like a volcano erupting under a glass dome. Allen uncoils the melody like a cable, then whips it until it dances in the air, beautiful and dangerous. If you close your eyes, you can picture that horn, glowing in the dark.

— PHILIP FREEMAN

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PHOTOGRAPHY FRANK McKENNA
ART DIRECTION / DESIGN REBECCA MEEK
PR KIM SMITH