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WILLIE JONES III

The Next Phase (WJ3)



“The Thorn” kicks things off on the latest from drummer Willie Jones III, a New York-based drummer currently performing with Joe Lovano and Cyrus Chestnut in addition to leading his own group. It’s an apt title for the opening track to a set on which nearly everything is sharp, finely honed and imbued with an impellent thrust. Jones’ drumming drives the music forcefully, although he wisely avoids declamatory pyrotechnics; tenor saxophonist Greg Tardy spins and pirouettes with muscular grace; vibraphonist Warren Wolf has a dynamic attack that elicits a taut tone mercifully far from the dreaded “ding-dong bells” sound the instrument often approximates; trombonist Steve Davis employs a smooth, richly textured tone, bringing a soothing element of relaxed jollity to even his most bluntly propulsive lines; and pianist Eric Reed unleashes broadly splayed chords along with complex, highly propulsive single-note runs. Even the concentric swirls that Reed and Jones create together at various points push things forward relentlessly, a circular motion that drives the proceedings ahead like gears meshing.

The only problematic tracks are the two that feature vocalists. Claudia Acuña admirably shifts, colors and otherwise tweaks her timbre on the wordless “Melancholy Mind,” but her “la-la-la-lay” syllabic utterances don’t sound very melancholy, and the piece’s too-sprightly tempo doesn’t seem appropriate for the putative theme. Folksinger Buffy Sainte-Marie’s “Until It’s Time for You to Go” could conceivably be recast in a jazz context (e.g., Nina Simone’s take on Leonard Cohen’s “Suzanne”), but Renee Neufville doesn’t pull it off: Her phrasing and textures are too stiff to attain the meld of sensuality and sentiment necessary to do the song justice.

Overall, though, this is an exciting, often inspirational blend of straightahead, swinging ebullience and forward-looking improvisational flair. **DAVID WHITEIS**