



Wish List

Mike Holober Quintet

Mike Holober (Piano) Tim Ries (Tenor & Soprano Sax) Wolfgang Muthspiel (Guitar) John Patitucci (Bass) Brian Blade (Drums)

Sons of Sound (2003)

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WOLFGANG MUTHSPIEL GUITAR
JOHN PATITUCCI BASS
BRIAN BLADE DRUMS
TIM RIES SAXOPHONES

Liner Notes

Steve Armour

Why make a jazz record? It's an abstract question, and sitting with Mike Holober in a room at City College, where he teaches, he doesn't have a ready answer. We're listening to *Wish List* and discussing liner note ideas, and the music coming through the big speakers near the blackboard is arguing against my question. I find myself thinking: This is great music. Phenomenal music. Its existence is self-justifying, isn't it?

Sure. Yes. Whatever. But I can't help asking Mike: Why do it? In this age of instant CDs, of too much product, not enough audience, no money, why make a jazz record? I propose a philosophical motive, a quote from the mythologist Joseph Campbell: "Some say we're looking for a meaning to life. I think what we're looking for is the experience of being alive."

Mike nods. He's respectful, but that's not it. He didn't make *Wish List* to experience being alive. He hikes, he camps, he reads, he has friends, family, he has his life with Melissa. He's well aware he's alive, CD or not.

I try another idea: Some musicians use the verb "document" when they discuss their recordings. "It was time, man," they'll say, "time to document my shit." So I ask, is that what *Wish List* is? Documentation? Mike shrugs. Sure, he supposes it is. But that's not the point either—though a CD is a calling card of sorts, he admits. It opens doors. That's a reason to make it.

I think: A calling card? Something to be stamped out by the thousands and handed around? Music of this depth? There has to be more to it.

I ask about the band. He describes a gig they played. He got a van from Rent-a-Wreck and they drove out to Pennsylvania — these guys with names on their resumes like Wayne Shorter, Chick Corea, the Rolling Stones, Joni Mitchell — drove out to Pennsylvania in a Rent-a-Wreck and played at a club, played so well, Mike says, it was almost depressing, played so well it made him sad to imagine playing anything else ever.

What made it so special? I ask. No egos in this band, he says. The musicians aren't working for him, they're working together. He points out examples on the CD: That vamp behind John's solo

on “Conundrum”? It goes from piano to saxophone and guitar because Tim thought it would sound cool—I would never have thought of that. Or the last note on “Boo”? Brian suggested pushing it up half a beat, so we did. Or the vamp behind the drum solo “Tulainyo.” It’s four bars instead of two because Wolfgang thought it would make more space for Brian.

That vamp is important, Mike says, because a drum solo won’t necessarily advance the form if there’s nothing behind it. Form interests Mike more than anything else. You can experiment with it, he says, or use it as a jumping off point. Like “Blackbird”: It’s the exact form the Beatles used, with just a little vamp added.

He sits forward. Listen to Wolfgang there, he says. Hear how he uses the effect pedal for just an instant? Wolfgang’s all about making the tune sound like itself, you know? Not making it the Wolfgang show. Or Brian on “Nancy”, he says, slinking around —like Nancy Sinatra: These boots are made for walkin’... He smiles. I ask, “Is this why you do it? Is it the people, the friendships?” He squints. That’s not it either.

I try asking about the titles. Well, he says, “Wish List” is hikes I want to make. “Bumphs” was called “Bumps” until Brian said “Bumphs” and we all started saying it. “Opening Day” is the day each Spring when we open the country house. “Tulainyo” is the highest lake in the continental US. “Conundrum” has a sort of circular melody . . . He thinks a moment. You know, when I’m writing something, he says, if I haven’t written the tune down the title will sometimes bring it back. Titles matter.

It’s just an aside, titles matter, a little thing, but it strikes me. They matter? Really? The experience of being alive is a gutter ball, but titles matter? Why? Why name tunes at all? Why not use numbers or pictograms or the Dewey Decimal System?

It’s not until later, after Mike and I have finished and I’m on the train home to Brooklyn, that I get it. Titles are part of the craft, and Mike has just demonstrated in about nine different ways that craft is everything.

Because music is not an abstraction. Music is not thought. It’s a physical thing: sound waves that buzz through the air and across your skin and into your muscles and bones. It’s a thing people do, not something they think.

Mike, like all musicians, like Wolfgang and Brian and Tim and John, is a craftsman. He builds music. Through imagination, through collaboration, through practice and study, through experimentation and dropping pretense and ego, through work and time and effort, he builds music: flexible, inspired, grown-up, intricate, potent, heart-grabbing music. Why isn’t part of the equation.

The result this time is *Wish List*. And it should be documented. It will give you the experience of being alive. It does reflect friendships, relationships. And in a better world it would absolutely be stamped out by the thousands and passed around to everyone.

Why make it? Who cares. Put away your questions. Put down the damn liner notes and listen.