



GROVER WASHINGTON, JR.: MISTER MAGIC

The emotion and vitality of his playing, his quiet but dominant personality, and—let's face it—a couple of good breaks, have in a short time made Grover Washington, Jr. a considerable force in popular music. He also commands respect among jazzmen.

During an engagement with his quartet at the Half Note, New York's venerable jazz club, Grover was pulling in the expected audience of hip young black people familiar with his recorded versions of pop hits. One evening a certain crusty jazz veteran noted for his musicianship and his acid critiques wandered in and sat scowling at the bar, listening. When the set ended the scowl remained, but there was an announcement to no one, and everyone, in the gruffest of stage whispers.

"Cat can play."

It was a benediction equivalent to a bushel of five-star reviews.

This is the fourth of Washington's carefully spaced, planned and produced Kudu albums. The proportion of original material is larger than in the previous collections.

"Earth Tones," with its shifting colors, impressionistic interludes, and lush, floor-of-the-jungle atmosphere, is by Bob James, Grover's collaborator on all of his LPs. Grover is heard on soprano sax in the opening moments, but it is during his tenor solo that he really digs into the earth tones. A marvelously warm performance. Eric Gale's guitar solo maintains the feeling.

Percussionist Ralph MacDonald's "Mister Magic" and "Black Frost" by Washington and James are soulful settings for Grover's tenor. The lineage of the Washington tenor style is long and honorable and includes such older contemporaries as Stanley Turrentine, Willis Jackson and Jimmy Forrest, and founding fathers like Ben Webster, Ike Quebec and Gene Ammons. Grover is building on the tradition, adding to it with his decidedly contemporary outlook, which includes more than a nodding acquaintance with developments pioneered by John Coltrane. You may hear more of that aspect of his work on Randy Weston's "Blues Moses" (CTI 6016).

"Passion Flower" was written by Billy Strayhorn for the celebrated 1941 Johnny Hodges small band session that also produced "Things Ain't What They Used To Be" and "Good Queen Bess."

"When I'm playing that, it's supposed to be very, very soft," Hodges once said, "and you're supposed to close your eyes and dream awhile."

Washington observes the spirit, and he plays the piece on soprano, an instrument of which Hodges was master, but one he abandoned the year of the original "Passion Flower" recording. While there is no detectable Hodges influence in Grover's beautifully constructed improvised solo, he shares Johnny's respect for the gorgeous melody during his first and final choruses. Harvey Mason's drum obligato to the strings on the bridge of the second chorus is a lovely moment.

Oh, yes, about those good breaks. Grover joined organist Johnny "Hammond" Smith in 1971 just in time to record with Smith for Kudu, and was immediately signed to the label. Then, given an outlet, Washington formed his own band, began making his own breaks, and found a delighted audience for his music. But that's not surprising.

Cat can play.

—Notes by Doug Ramsey

phone
Bodner (baritone)
Dodgion (tenor)

bone
e Andre
Studd (bass)

n
Ellen
Gershman
y Glickman
ld Kohon
y Lookofsky
Malin
d Nadien
ew Raimondi

rown
ny Vardi

les McCracken
Shulman

Album photographs by Alen MacWeeney
Album design by Bob Ciano

This album is also available on
stereo 8 track and cassette tapes.

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