

**The Darius Brubeck Quartet featuring Dave O'Higgins, Matt Ridley, Wesley Gibbens:
Live in Poland
Ubuntu Music (UBU0033)**

**Darius Brubeck-piano
Dave O'Higgins-tenor saxophone
Matt Ridley-bass
Wesley Gibbens-drums**

Track listing: Earthwise, In Your Own Sweet Way, Matt the Cat, Nomali, Sea of Troubles, Dziekuje, Take Five

The 2019 release of *Live in Poland* by the Darius Brubeck Quartet marks several important milestones. The recording comes to the listener *live* from the Blue Note Jazz Club in Poznan following a 2018 six-city tour throughout Poland. 2018 is an important year in Poland as the quartet's tour marks the 100th anniversary of Polish Independence and the 60th anniversary of the 1958 "behind the Iron Curtain tour" by the legendary Dave Brubeck Quartet accompanied by Dave's 10-year old son Darius. One can't imagine the effect these important milestones and events were personally felt by Darius and the group's performers. This live recording captures and reflects a joyous and emotional performance by the group embraced by an appreciative audience that is heard at the conclusion of each tune and most lovingly felt on *Dziekuje* and *Take Five*. Good vibes throughout!

The album opens in grand fashion with thunderous chords by Darius Brubeck on his composition *Earthwise* before settling into an infectious 7/4 groove. The arrangement can be viewed as a model for any aspiring arranger in terms of its overall shape and design. Perhaps inspired from Herbie Hancock's late 1960s jazz-rock hit *Maiden Voyage* in terms of style, and America's Moon landing with images of our planet from space, Darius works the piece from its rubato opening to a climatic quartet shout chorus before returning to the main theme. The melody statement by saxophonist Dave O'Higgins is clear as a bell followed by a melodically thoughtful solo that begs out for lyrics. Each of O'Higgins' solos on the album demonstrates his ability as a thoughtful and melodic based improviser careful to stay away from well-known licks while possessing the chops to do so and easily run up and down the horn. O'Higgins throughout the recording resounds with a Texas-Size sound reflecting influences from Dexter Gordon to Michael Brecker. Following Dave's *Earthwise* solo Darius takes the reins and demonstrates his vast abilities as a top-notch improviser and pianist, and master of playing in odd time signatures. For any interested pianist reading this, Darius's playing throughout the recording is a lesson in itself. His use of and combination of single-note playing, octave playing, depth of chordal shapes and sounds, counterpoint, rhythmic & motivic development, dynamics and the often-overlooked *art of jazz accompaniment* are all worthy of appreciation and study. With Darius at the helm, his playing and direction transmits throughout the quartet and performance in a seamless fashion, giving everyone in the group a chance to shine. Bassist Matt Ridley gets special kudos for his impeccable tone and intonation, choice of notes, and superb time keeping; his all too brief solo within the trading section of *Earthwise* is an ear opening new vista to the piece. Matt's main rhythm partner throughout is drummer Wesley Gibbins, who's playing never

overpowers, while driving the group throughout this historic live performance on a hot low flame.

The well-known 1950s Dave Brubeck masterpiece *In Your Own Sweet Way* has become a standard and an essential part of any serious jazz player's repertoire. It is a strikingly beautiful melody while at the same time a challenge for any improviser with its ever-changing key centres. The three main soloists (Brubeck, O'Higgins and Ridley) meet and surpass the challenge while breathing new life into the work and at the same time having fun. Again, for any interested pianist, Darius takes the listener down many paths. His use of melodic and motivic development is on full display. Darius at times takes the listener to other past Centuries with his use of Baroque elements and good old counterpoint with a nod to Johannes Sebastian Bach. At the conclusion of Darius's solo, he hands the baton over the Dave who cleverly picks it up with Darius's last musical idea and develops thoughtfully from there. Matt then solos with melodic and rhythmic ease, and opens another window within the quartet framework before the final statement of the melody. Generally, the sound of bass solos in a live format leave a lot to be desired, had but here the sound is crystal clear as he draws the listener in with many delicacies and intricate playing. Matt Ridley is one fine young bass player.

The only medium-up tempo piece on the recording is *Matt the Cat*, which is played sharply by the quartet and perhaps portrays a clever cat pawing at the listener with its quirky, jerky theme. Good times are had with excellent solos all around and with Wesley Gibbens now being shown the spotlight with musical tasteful exchanges with bassist Ridley. Wesley's use of lower sounds via the lower range of the drums during the interactive solo with Matt are quite clever and give the medium fast piece another shape and timbre. On a further note, there is something about Darius Brubeck's pieces that have always attracted the listener in that there is normally a catchy theme and or short rhythmic idea on display, while at the same time integrating the best of the jazz tradition for the soloist to sink their teeth into. Darius Brubeck can be viewed as a master tune craftsman no matter what stylistic path he travels on. *Matt the Cat* does that in an excellent way with short, concise themes, snappy rhythms and shifting harmonic movements. The abrupt ending leaves the listener like a cat on the edge of a nine-story building.

Nomali by the late South African Jazz icon Hugh Masekela is most likely Darius's personal tribute to *Bra* Hugh, and takes the listener to another part of the world with its laid-back tempo, sing-able diatonic melody and simple harmonic shell. Simplicity here is the key and the quartet relays that with sincerity. Darius's many years spent in South Africa as an educator and performer helped to shape and develop a personal authenticity within the scope of South African Jazz performance practice.

At nearly nine minutes in length, the time travels rather quickly as Darius and Dave develop their solos from a blank slate using the simplest of ideas, building and increasing intensity throughout before the final theme is heard combined with some surprising intricate double-time passages. It is quite rare to hear US or Europe based mainstream jazz quartets move out of their comfort zone and to a far-away land without sounding out of place. However, *Nomali* strikes all the right buttons which is evident in the response from the audience, who I would venture to say are not too familiar with the *vibey* South African Jazz laid-back township style, which in many ways was pioneered by Hugh *Bra* Masekela.

Sea of Troubles is another piece of just over nine minutes that covers lots of ground. At a similar tempo and placed back to back on the recording with *Nomali*, there is a danger here. However, the development within the *Sea of Troubles* is like a vast sea or ocean. Darius again shows his worth as a clever composer, and arranger for the DBQ. Having personally recorded this piece in duo fashion with Darius, the quartet gives it a whole new meaning in terms of scope and depth. Gibbens, again shows his talent for underpinning the work with his sensitive mallet work again building and stoking the fire throughout, while Dave and Darius lay out clear, melodic solos that connect all the dots within the arrangement of the work. Darius's use of *hooks* within the piece as both forward and backward looking are to be commended as they link and calm the waters of *Sea of Troubles* before its final melodic statement.

Dziekuje, composed by and played by Dave Brubeck upon his inaugural trip to Poland some 60 years odd years ago as *thank you* to the people of Poland is quite poignant and brings the house down. I believe this is the first recorded by the Darius Brubeck quartet version of the piece and it is played with sensitivity, thoughtfulness and *thankfulness* throughout. If one thinks of that 10-year boy Darius who long ago visited Poland and is now on stage playing this beautiful theme, we have to embrace that the gift of music and the manner in which Dave Brubeck's music has positively influenced the world is beyond first thought of the 1958 tour. This 2018 tour recording and project to have happened is not done by sleight of hand, but by caring artists and with the support of lifelong partner and manager Catherine Brubeck. People and as well as humanitarians that understands how America's greatest gift to the world in that of jazz music has been and will continue to be a positive force.

Take Five by Paul Desmond and probably Dave Brubeck's biggest hits and one of jazz's biggest hits, is still hitting high marks and reaching audiences worldwide after 60 plus years is the icing on the cake of this recording. The piece is slightly re-worked with a trip to the bridge section and temporary key change during the O'Higgins solo section, which breaks up the Eb-pedal point nicely. Both Dave and Darius give outstanding contrasting solos in nature that transports the listener to another time and place. Darius's solo is case study in improvisation as it combines multi-faceted rhythms, a harmonically adventurous ear, flurries of notes, and pianistic leaps into the land of Fredrick Chopin, Franz Litz, and McCoy Tyner. Following Darius's solo, Wesley Gibbens 3 ½ plus minute drum solo on *Take Five* leaves the audience wanting and yelling for more. Wesley's solo, anchored by Matt Ridley's clear bass vamp never turns into the slick, flashy "hey look at me" drum feature. It develops gradually and features the lower sounds of the drums that is refreshing and pleasing and at the same time communicates with Ridley with each throwing the other ideas to play off of. Evidence of love and appreciation is clearly felt and exhibited by the Polish people at the conclusion of *Take Five*, and for the quartet's night of thrilling music and time well spent in Poland by the Darius Brubeck Quartet.

Mike Rossi
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