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Stan Kenton Alumni Band: Road Scholars

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Road Scholars? A clever title indeed, but these gentlemen (and three ladies) are more akin to "road maestros," an appraisal that is abundantly clear from A to Z on this latest recording by trumpeter Mike Vax's turbo-charged Stan Kenton Alumni Band, taped at various concerts during the band's 2013 spring tour, a two-week, three-thousand-mile odyssey that encompassed a dozen concerts in six states and the District of Columbia. About four thousand people were lucky enough to see and hear the band in person; the rest of us will have to make do with these fourteen imperfect snapshots culled from its series of remarkable performances.

The word "imperfect" is used not owing to any weakness in the band itself but simply because there is nothing as impressive or inspiring as seeing a band such as this while seated in the audience. Be that as it may, inserting this recording in a CD player and pressing "play" is the next best thing to being there. The repertoire runs the gamut from Jose Feliciano to Giacomo Puccini, Jerome Kern to Quincy Jones, the band is sharp and smokin' from the outset, and there's never a letdown during almost seventy minutes of splendid music-making.

The disc opens, appropriately enough, with trumpeter Ray Brown's free and easy flag-waver, "Neverbird," written in honor of Kenton's tour bus, which bore that nickname, but never recorded by the Kenton orchestra. Agile solos courtesy of tenor Pete Gallio and trumpeter Carl Saunders, exemplary timekeeping (as is always the case) by drummer Gary Hobbs and bassist Jennifer Leitham. Trombonist Dale DeVoe arranged Rodgers and Hammerstein's "I Have Dreamed" (from *The King and I*), on which he solos with trumpeter Don Rader and the band's youngest member, pianist Charlie Ferguson. The litmus test for any big band is Bill Holman's classic arrangement of "Stompin' at the Savoy," and if the Kenton alums don't ace it they come extremely close, thanks to forceful blowing by the ensemble and persuasive solos from Ferguson, Rader, Leitham and tenor Rick Condit.

Feliciano's lyrical theme from "Chico and the Man" is next (solos by Vax and Condit), followed by trumpeter Steve Huffsteter's impish original, "Sneaky" (on which he is out front with Gallio, Saunders and alto Kim Richmond) and another memorable Holman chart, "Yesterdays," with Condit sitting in for its catalyst, the late Bill Perkins. Rader, Richmond and Ferguson shine again on Rick Stitzel's lively arrangement of the standard "A Beautiful Friendship." Besides playing great trombone, Scott Whitfield is one-half of a delightful singing duo with Ginger Berglund, and they are simply marvelous on Quincy Jones' Stockholm Sweetnin'" and Johnny Mandel's "Cinnamon and Clove," after which Vax's soaring trumpet is showcased on Puccini's enchanting "Nessun Dorma," an aria immortalized by tenor Luciano Pavarotti.

Whitfield is the soloist on Harry Warren's engaging "Lullaby of Broadway," nicely arranged by Lennie Niehaus for Kenton's dance book, which precedes the album's lone Kenton composition / arrangement, "Reed Rapture," a sumptuous tone poem for the saxophones (sans rhythm section) written in 1940. The band rings down the curtain with DeVoe's debonair "Alex Revisited," a close cousin to his equally well-knit "Alex's Tune," which debuted on the band's earlier album *Sounds from the Road* (Summit 518), and DeVoe's powerful Kenton-inspired arrangement of Samuel Ward's "America the Beautiful." DeVoe, Ferguson, Hobbs and baritone Phil Hilger solo on "Alex Revisited."

Apart from its obvious awareness and proficiency, this truly is an alumni band, as no less than a dozen of the twenty members—including everyone in the trumpet section—once played with the renowned Stan Kenton Orchestra. Needless to say, that kind of experience is worth more than its weight in gold. The Kenton alliance extends to three of the saxophonists, three trombonists and, perhaps most decisively, to drummer Hobbs who teams with Leitham to act as the ensemble's unerring compass, reinforced along the way by percussionist Dee Huffsteter. To observe that these *Road Scholars* have passed every test would be an understatement. Even with sound that is inescapably variable, the band rises above every obstacle to produce a recording whose excellence would surely have left Kenton himself beaming with pride.

Track Listing: Neverbird; I Have Dreamed; Stompin' at the Savoy; Chico & the Man; Sneaky; Yesterdays; A Beautiful Friendship; Stockholm Sweetnin'; Cinnamon and Clove; Nessun Dorma; Lullaby of Broadway; Reed Rapture; Alex Revisited; America the Beautiful.

Personnel: Mike Vax: trumpet, music director; Dennis Noday: trumpet; Carl Saunders: trumpet; Don Rader: trumpet; Steve Huffsteter: trumpet; Kim Richmond: alto sax; Pete Gallio: tenor sax; Rick Condit: tenor sax; Joel Kaye: baritone sax; Phil Hilger: baritone sax; Roy Wiegand: trombone; Dale DeVoe: trombone; Kenny Shroyer: trombone; Scott Whitfield: trombone, vocals; Rich Bullock: bass trombone; Charlie Ferguson: piano; Jennifer Leitham: bass; Gary Hobbs: drums; Dee Huffsteter: percussion; Ginger Berglund: vocals.

Record Label: Summit Records