



Pretty Fly for Three Jazz Guys



Drummer Jeff Ballard, tenor saxophonist Mark Turner and bassist Larry Grenadier comprise *Fly*, one of the hottest new groups on the post-bop modern jazz scene. Their self-titled debut on the resuscitated Savoy Jazz imprint runs the voodoo down from free-style improvisations to more structured and melodic compositions.

As teenagers, Ballard and Grenadier cut their teeth on bandstands throughout Northern California before heading to the East Coast where they met Turner. Years later, the threesome became part of a Chick Corea recording project dubbed *Originations*, a forum that allowed individual members to contribute original material. From that, *Fly* were born.

And this is not your father's jazz trio. In *Fly*'s world, the usual modus operandi of endless theme and variation or round-robin rifting has given way to an intimate three-way dialogue. The result is an expansive, illuminating palette of harmonies, tones and expressive counterpoint.

"Collaboration is the killing-est thing jazz has to

offer," emphasizes Ballard. "Larry is a modern cat, who can cover a lot of ground. He's an outlier, a real meat-and-potatoes guy. We're not just laying a carpet for Mark to solo over."

Turner, who has recorded extensively under his own name and alongside fellow tenor-sax star Joshua Redman and bassist John Patitucci, among others, is quick to note that the recording dates for the disc, which only took two days, "were the smoothest sessions I've ever done. We were chilled out and there was no high-strung musical neurosis going on."

Adds Ballard: "Our music does not lend itself to a 'leader.' A leader hires you for yourself, and you play yourself, but you're still playing his thing. This is 'our' thing."

Self produced and recorded live in the studio with few overdubs, *Fly* not only breaks new ground but also pays homage to musical predecessors outside jazz. Grenadier's "JJ," which features dexterous grooves most upright bassists would find impossible to navigate, is a funky

paean to the legendary soul bassist Jerry Jemmott. Ballard brought in a BBC live recording of the Jimi Hendrix Experience's *Axis Bold As Love* gem "Spanish Castle Magic."

"It's a totally dangerous song to cover," says Ballard, who sounds somewhat surprised that *Fly* were able to pull it off. "You need to really throw it all down on that tune, because if you don't it becomes a poor representation, and then it's downright embarrassing!"

The band's most personal offering is "Fly Mr. Freak-jar," written in the studio by all three members and the final track recorded. Nailed in one take, the tune embodies what Ballard refers to as "filling the spaces, and not filling the spaces. It's about what's inferred, what's in the air. I find more truth in taking risks than in playing it safe," a credo that carries over to *Fly*'s concert performances.

"The other night at the Vanguard, Mark said to Larry and me that 'last night was nice, but we weren't as close to the edge of the cliff as we could be. Let's push it out and look over.'"