

Jeff Colella - Reviews

LOTUS BLOSSOM

All About Jazz

by Dan Bilawsky

Jeff Colella - Putter Smith – Lotus Blossom

Lotus Blossom is an absorbing date that projects plaintive beauty, reflective moods, and introspective ideals. It's a meeting of two master musicians who engage in thoughtful conversation that's quietly emotive.

Pianist Jeff Colella, who's worked with everybody from vocalist Lou Rawls to arranging-composing legend Bill Holman, and bassist Putter Smith, whose credits include extensive work with pianist Alan Broadbent and a whole host of other jazz greats, weren't strangers before this recording. They'd actually been playing together, on-and-off, for two decades before they entered the studio for this session. Some successful duo dates at Vibrato—a Herb Alpert-backed jazz club in Bel Air—planted the seed for this recording, as both men, excited by their on-stage chemistry, became interested in the prospect of finally documenting their partnership. Here, they tackle eight tunes that prove enchanting and (mostly) meditative.

The album opens on Smith's lone compositional contribution—the pleasantly roaming "Desert Passes." "Time Remembered" comes next, serving as the first of three references to the great Bill Evans; the other nods—an excitable "All Blues" and life-affirming "You Must Believe In Spring"—prove to be two of the strongest performances. Other high points on the album include a soft-handed take on "The Very Thought Of You" and a gently wandering look at Billy Strayhorn's "Lotus Blossom," but pointing out a few great performances here is somewhat pointless. This is the kind of album that should be heard from start to finish. It's a work of finesse and focus that deserves and rewards attentive, uninterrupted listening.

Midwest Record

by Chris Spector

Jeff Colella-Putter Smith/Lotus Blossom

Pure muso alert. Two long time west coast jazzbos that have been working a lot together for the got rocks in Bel Air decide it's time to take off the gloves and record together bringing their voluminous chops to the fore. So how do they do it? By making the quietest album ever since Sinatra teamed up with Jobim. Piano, bass and that's it. The interplay is that of pure pros bowling you over in under stated fashion. A seriously killer album for when you want to feel grown up and sophisticated, this is the kind of stuff that's right up there with the classics of the genre/form. Hot stuff throughout that's sure to put you in the mind of duets like Hank Jones and Charlie Haden.

Jazz Society of Pensacola
by F. Norman Vickers
Lotus Blossom - Jeff Colella - Putter Smith

This CD has a piano-bass duo unfamiliar to me. However, on listening to the mix of tunes, more than half are from established composers and the remainder by one or the other artists on the CD. So let's examine: *Time Remembered* by Bill Evans; *The Very Thought of You* by Ray Noble; Miles Davis' *All Blues*; Michael LeGrande's *You Must Believe in Spring* and the very familiar *Lotus Blossom* by Billy Strayhorn make up the list by familiar composers. Bassist Putter Smith composed the initial tune, *Desert Passes*, Larry Koonse composed *Candle* and pianist Jeff Colella composed *Gone Too Soon*. Now, what makes this CD unique? Why another bass-piano duo? For this reviewer, anyway, the tunes are played at a tempo where the listener can relish every note and appreciate the special rapport between the two performers. Bassist Putter has a great sense of time and melody.

Under what conditions would I especially enjoy this album? I'd categorize it as a late-night album or when one is in an especially reflective mood. It's hardly likely to be considered dance music. On hearing this album, it made me go to the piano and play Michael LeGrand's *You Must Believe in Spring* and also Strayhorn's perennial, gorgeous *Lotus Blossom*. That tune is worth the price of the album!

Jazz Music
by CJ Bond
L O T U S B L O S S O M - Jeff Colella - Putter Smith

CD Review: Jeff Colella and Putter Smith's new CD: *Lotus Blossom* is a feast of beautiful melodies, engaging harmonies and sweet nostalgia. Although Colella and Smith 'wince' at the word virtuoso, they are not many other ways to describe their playing which is bolstered by decades of collective jazz history and narrative. Undoubtedly, both men are survivors, innovators, and accomplished jazz improvisers. For more than sixteen years, Colella was the pianist/conductor for singer Lou Rawls, and Putter Smith has worked with legendary pianist/composer Thelonious Monk, drummer/educator Art Blakey, singer/bandleader Billy Eckstine, singer Carmen McRae, R&B/Soul great Ray Charles and others.

Narrative is unavoidable in *Lotus Blossom*. Certainly there is more than one running through the work; there are the conscious narratives of Colella and Smith that pertain to emotional character, assertions, references, responses and the historical discourse in their collaboration. But one the most appealing and enduring is the dormant narrative awakened by the natural selection of the music of five interesting jazz composers, Billy Strayhorn, Miles Davis, Bill Evans, Ray Noble and Michel Legrand, through whom the concept motif of 'influence' appears dominant and unyielding. It is undeniable that the concept of influence has proven to be an indispensable force in the forward movement of the jazz tradition from its inception.

Pianist Jeff Colella
Billy Strayhorn must be considered one of the most influential and challenging twentieth century composers of jazz music. The extent of his canon may never be fully known; much of it blurred in the fog of collaborations with Duke Ellington. He wrote more than 300 compositions and arrangements for the Ellington band. His acknowledged compositions are masterpieces and classics. Strayhorn wrote "Lush Life" at 18. A starkly challenging song for talented vocalists; it earned a unique distinction as being the

song that Sinatra did not record because of the changing, intertwining colors in the melody of the chorus. Strayhorn's "Chelsea Bridge" deeply influenced composer/arranger Gil Evans whose collaborations with Miles Davis in *The Birth of The Cool*, modal jazz, free jazz and jazz fusion are the stuff of jazz legend. Colella and Smith select Strayhorn's 1959 enigmatic (*Lotus Blossom*) - not even Ellington could figure it out - as the title track. Billy Strayhorn perceived exquisite beauty in very simple things...like a flower; Colella's piano and Smith's bass reflect its simple radiance with economy of effort, but with democratic attention to detail.

As far as the idea of jazz influence manifesting itself, it had no agent, or figure, more electrifying, controversial and innovative to forge and polish than trumpeter/composer Miles Davis; it continues to strengthen his legacy. Davis' 1959 album "*Kind of Blue*" is acknowledged as the best-selling jazz album in jazz history, as well as being one of the most influential albums ever made. Colella and Smith reprise Davis' 12 bar blues composition (*All Blues*), with Colella's piano gently swinging the melody, while Smith's bass anchors the tune harmonically; extending the bass line with hip, witty, cool improvisations.

Bassist Putter Smith

The influence of pianist Bill Evans on post-bop keyboardists is considerable, Evans, who was directly influenced by Bud Powell and Lenny Tristano, is regarded as one of the greatest pianists in jazz history. His architectural concepts, inventive interpretation of modern jazz repertoire, and the appeal of his spell-binding voicings continue to influence pianists today. Here Colella and Smith select Evans' modal and impressionistic composition (*Time Remembered*). This tune first appeared on a live album recorded at (Shelly's Manne's Club, Hollywood, CA), and released in 1983. Colella goes the distance to capture the depth of meaning inherent in the song's title with Evans-like relaxed, introspective lyricism.

The influences generated by bandleader/pianist Ray Noble, and the quintessential French musical composer/arranger/conductor/pianist Michel Legrand are more nuanced, and in the case of Legrand more eclectic. Ray Noble's compositions got the attention of jazz musicians. Charley Parker in particular, who used the chord changes of Noble's 1938 jazz standard "*Cherokee*" as the basis for his (Parker's) composition "*KoKo*," opened the door for other jazz musicians to follow suit. Noble's music also had some influence on other jazz musicians like bebop pianist Bud Powell, trumpeter Clifford Brown, tenor saxophonists Stan Getz and Don Byas, and vibraphonist Lionel Hampton. Legrand's influence was international, fed through his haunting film music, television scores, and memorable songs. Noble's (*The Very Thought of You*), and Legrand's (*You Must Believe In Spring*) are among the most arresting and beautiful compositions of their respective composers, and these two pieces are played by the duo with all their aching elements of beauty, reminiscence and longing, delightfully etched in all the right places.

The narrative of nostalgia gives way to balanced modernity and freshness in three original compositions from Colella (*Gone Too Soon*), Smith (*Desert Passes*), and guitarist Larry Koonse (*Candle*). Koonse wrote the CD's liner notes, but does not appear on the date. Colella and Smith materialize into eternal seekers, providing jazz perspectives of immense discernment; decoding elusive influences; and translating narratives in the jazz tradition, as only jazz masters are able.

Serendipity ought to favor and reward students at the Musicians Institute in Hollywood, where Jeff Colella is a faculty member, and those at the Bass Institute of Technology in Los Angeles where Putter Smith is on the faculty, because both educator/musicians seem devoted to keeping pristine the tributaries of influence that sustain improvisational jazz, along with character, gesture, assertion, response, reference, and discourse, so that jazz music may continue to re-invent itself, and evolve.

Bebop Spoken Here

Jeff Colella & Putter Smith - Lotus Blossom

Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson laid down the benchmarks for other jazz pianists to aim at. Some made it, some didn't and some didn't try. Pianists such as Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett (on occasion) and others of a more introspective nature offered an alternative approach - less is more. Rather than cover up a paucity of ideas with an 88 notes per second dash, they dug deep into the harmonic structure, taking the melody and thoughtfully restructuring it as their own.

Jeff Colella is just such a musician. On this one hour long disc he plays a mix of jazz standards and originals. Not surprisingly, Bill Evans is well represented - *Time Remembered*, *You Must Believe in Spring* and *All Blues* are given emotive, melancholic renditions with Putter Smith (sounds more like a champion golfer than an ace bass) contributing in equal measure. As well as composing *Desert Passes*, Smith, back in 1971, played the film role of an assassin in the Bond Movie, *Diamonds Are Forever!* He's a much nicer person on this disc although, in a different context, it could be said his bass playing slays me!

Colella wrote the moody *Gone Too Soon*, dedicated to fellow musicians who left us prematurely whilst the title track, Strayhorn's *Lotus Blossom*, is as gorgeous as the name implies.

It's not a party disc, except maybe one to play after the drunks have staggered home and only the (music) lovers remain...

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Marlbank.net

Jeff Colella / Putter Smith, Lotus Blossom ***1/2

Shhh, quiet duo at work. West coast pianist Jeff Colella and bassist Putter Smith purr like the most contented of cats, for Evans' sake so civilised as they dream walk their way through classic material. 'Time Remembered', 'All Blues', a very slow and gathered up 'You Must Believe in Spring', and the Strayhorn title track to close, it's all sincere and so tasteful, where core values in the music are respected and enhanced.

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AXS

By Paula Edelstein

Jeff Colella and Putter Smith's 'Lotus Blossom'

Unfolds with Purity and Beauty

Titling an album "Lotus Blossom" immediately conjures up thoughts of this lovely flower that is known in the mythology of three major cultures to be associated with such virtues as rebirth, purity, beauty, fertility, spirituality and eternity. Those qualities are inherent in the new release by Los Angeles-based pianist Jeff Colella and bassist Putter Smith's stunning duet recording recently released on The American Jazz Institute/Capri recording label. The duo has been playing together informally for the better part of 20 years, but it wasn't until recently that they tended their fertile repertoire of choice standards and jazz originals to create the music heard on "Lotus Blossom."

Throughout their poignant program, Colella and Smith give fresh interpretations of pianist Bill Evans' original, "Time Remembered," the Michel Legrand-authored ballad, "You Must Believe In Spring" and "All Blues," one of the hallmark tracks from Miles Davis' best-selling jazz album, "Kind Of Blue." Their duets effectively deliver the purity, beauty and colors of those songs and skillfully support their new arrangements for their approach as a duo.

Smith's suggestive original, "Desert Passes," finds the duo fully complementing and balancing each other as well as playing with one musical mind. Larry Koonse's moody "Candle" is reimagined with a transcendent interpretation that is so sincere and so deep that it's like a divine ceremony. Ray Noble's classic, "The Very Thought of You," lets the lyrical qualities that both players share to fully emerge and permits the listener to fully enjoy a new 21st century version of this enduring composition. The two concluding tracks actually are dedicatory in nature. Colella's lovely "Gone Too Soon" carries the spirit of honesty, dedication and the elegiac feel that is borne out in the deeply emotive playing of Colella and Smith. Both of their delicate and sensitive musical voices are almost prayer-like and move the listener to deepen their involvement with the story behind the song.

The title track concludes the program and while Billy Strayhorn's "Lotus Blossom" pays tribute to Jimmy Rowles and his daughter Stacey (who passed in 2009), the very thought of the meaning of the lotus blossom resurrects feelings of the duo's ability to unfold and open themselves up to a new generation of jazz lovers who are exploring their fresh musical spectrum of expression.

Jeff Colella has worked with an array of instrumentalists and singers including Lou Rawls, Jack Jones, Anita O'Day, Eric Von Essen, Sheila Jordan, Bob Sheppard, Larry Koonse, Frank Potenza and Diane Schuur, and is a faculty member at the Musicians Institute in Hollywood, Calif. In addition to his work with such jazz masters as Art Pepper, Ray Charles, Carmen McRae and a host of others, Putter Smith is currently on the faculty of the Bass Institute of Technology in Los Angeles and the author of the method book, "Jazz Bass Improvisation."

Bop-N-Jazz
Brent Black

Beauty, elegance, and a quiet grace remind one that a simple unadorned melody and how it can touch the soul is the reason we both play and enjoy music, Jeff Colella and Putter Smith get that.

Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication and nowhere can this very simple yet powerful premise be more appreciated than with their latest release, Lotus Blossom. A bold collection of timeless standards and original with a distinct lyrical sense of purpose that elevate what would be stereotypically be an ordinary duet into an extraordinary harmonic experience.

The soul searing beauty of compositions such as Bill Evans "Time Remembered" and "All Blues" from Miles Davis are pulled from that special inner place far past the soul. Other emotive portraits of lyrical bliss include "The Very Thought of You" and "Lotus Blossom." What separates Lotus Blossom from a tightly clustered pack of predictability would be more than the obvious technical proficiency with which Colella and Smith attack their craft. There is a unique and rare synergy that occurs with both artists responding to the melodic flow occurring within each composition.

Lotus Blossom is a celebration of the soul and spirit of beauty that moves within music. Jeff Colella and Putter Smith are simply along for the ride as the lyrical vehicle from which such breathtaking expression is born.

Jazz Chill Corner
Lotus Blossom

Only the most sensitive and responsive of musicians can make quietude roar. On their stunning duet album, Lotus Blossom (May 20, 2014, The American Jazz Institute/Capri), two venerated veteran stylists, the pianist Jeff Colella and the bassist Putter Smith, communicate in muted tones that nonetheless pack a punch. Blending exquisite readings of choice standards and jazz originals, the album reasserts the timeless power of spontaneous music-making that places invention above virtuosity, empathy above individual showboating. As imaginative as it is expressive, Lotus Blossom can take its place with such piano-and-bass masterpieces as Keith Jarrett and Charlie Haden's Jasmine, Haden and Hank Jones's Steal Away, and the vaunted duo recordings of Jimmy Rowles and Ray Brown.

Lotus Blossom has been a long time in coming. Colella – a highly respected West Coast keyboardist who has had significant musical associations with Lou Rawls, Jack Jones and Stacey Rowles – and Smith, a musician's musician best known for his work with Alan Broadbent, Mose Allison and Mark Masters (and with James Bond fanatics for his role as the assassin, "Mr. Kidd," in the 1971 film, Diamonds Are Forever) have been playing together informally for the better part of the past two decades. Recent work as a duo at Vibrato, a Bel Air area club, stoked their interest in recording together.

Lotus Blossom was consciously conceived as a compact (under one hour) and cohesive set of music. Although not specifically intended as a tribute album to associates and musical influences that have passed, the album does have an elegiac feel that is borne out in the deeply emotive playing of the co-leaders and in the choice of affecting material. Three pieces are associated with the legendary pianist Bill Evans: the Evans original, "Time Remembered," the Michel Legrand-authored ballad, "You Must Believe In Spring" and "All Blues," one of the hallmark tracks from the epochal Miles Davis album, Kind Of Blue. Smith's suggestive original, "Desert Passes," the guitarist Larry Koonse's moody "Candle" and the Ray Noble classic "The Very Thought of You" all allow the lyrical qualities that both players share to fully emerge. The two concluding tracks actually are dedicatory in nature: Colella's lovely, "Gone Too Soon" calls to mind fellow musicians that left us prematurely, while Billy Strayhorn's "Lotus Blossom" references Jimmy Rowles and his daughter Stacey (who passed in 2009), who, when working together, would always end their sets with this gorgeous tune.

Throughout, Colella and Smith meld together indivisibly, their mutual communication and insistence that expression supplant instrumental prowess, remaining paramount. "The music has needs of its own, outside of our interpretation," Colella states. "Virtuosity has to emerge organically from the music, it can never be forced. Technique must always serve the music – it can't be imposed on it." With Lotus Blossom, Colella and Smith remind us that, when it comes to music, respect reaps rewards.

Jeff Colella has worked with a panoply of instrumentalists and singers including Lou Rawls, Jack Jones, Anita O'Day, Eric Von Essen, Sheila Jordan, Bob Sheppard, Larry Koonse, Frank Potenza and Diane Schuur, and is a faculty member at the Musicians Institute in Hollywood, California. In addition to his work with such jazz masters as Art Pepper, Ray Charles, Carmen McRae and a host of others, Putter

Smith is currently on the faculty of the Bass Institute of Technology in Los Angeles and the author of the method book, "Jazz Bass Improvisation."

Stage Buddy
Roark Littlefield

Time stands still for just under an hour while "Lotus Blossom", a new recording of beautiful duets between two Los Angeles jazz masters, pianist Jeff Colella and bass player Putter Smith, gently releases its intoxicating sounds.

The album begins with Smith's own gripping composition, "Desert Passes". The strange-sounding opening notes on the bass herald the mystery (or is it menace?) of the album to come. The first time this phrase of Putter's is heard, it delivers the sensation of a mild, mysterious hangover. Colella responds with an intriguing phrase of his own, completing it with a chord that is repeated, sounding for all the world like "yes, yes." Each time these phrases come back they become more and more familiar until the mystery and discomfort slide away. The hangover is gone and the notes feel as blissful as the gorgeous hair of the dog does when it begins to work its magic.

As delightful as this opening number is, the most magical piece is the bold interpretation of the Miles Davis classic "All Blues". Without the horns and with Smith deep into his own thing, it is Colella who lets us know what tune this is. But he bravely goes in his own direction, too, including a passage that reminded me of "Round Midnight".

Among Colella's musical gifts is his elegant phrasing, which delightfully recalls Bill Evans. Like Smith he develops bright, unusual and memorable motifs that come back again after disappearing for a while into mysterious dark shadows. When they return they are ever more satisfying. Before hearing "Lotus Blossom" I can't remember the last time I closed my eyes to listen to music.

Smith does not merely support Colella's majestic piano, he matches it note for dynamic note, often taking the lead to take Colella and the listener down whatever murky, twisting paths lie ahead. This is bass playing as fine as it gets, bold, confident and as clear as any instrument that has been mastered by any musician. He shows that in the right hands the bass can be as dynamic as the piano. Smith is a well-known master of his instrument, having played with Thelonius Monk and many other greats over the decades. But his duets with Colella are true dances among equal partners, which of course, is what jazz is truly all about. As Mr. Colella and Mr. Smith create sounds to bounce off one another they tell the listener that they are quite aware that one is never too old to learn from a master. Heartwarming, Mr. Colella. A glowing tribute, Mr. Smith.

ALONE TOGETHER

L.A. Jazz Scene
By Jim Santella
Jeff Colella Trio: *Alone Together* (Sea Breeze Jazz)

The piano trio has been as much a part of jazz as any of its other vital elements. Three artists are able to interpret freely as one, while their individual voices remain unique. Pianist Jeff Colella, bassist Trey

Henry and drummer Kendall Kay are quite familiar to Southern California straight-ahead jazz audiences. Capable veterans who often venture into the realm of the modern mainstream, the three remain connected and balance each other with complementary ideas. Drifting currents and the relaxed melody of "Skylark" start the trio on its adventurous journey through lands near and far. Colella allows his harmonies to overlap and create a smooth sensation that's both rich and accurate. A medley of "Oz's Dream," "Alone Together" and "Bailey's Lament" turns exotic, as the trio combines two of their compositions with the title track. Bassist and drummer both step out with brief solo spots that continue the exotic nature that the pianist has mapped out for this vagabond pastiche. Henry moves into a walking bass pattern to begin Bill Evans' dreamy "Re: Person I Knew" and Kay moves from brushes to sticks. The mood, however, remains consistently relaxed, as the pianist continues his journey along familiar roads. Colella's trio offers something for everyone, with a distinct emphasis on the mood depicted by its familiar title.

Downbeat

By Paul DeBarros

Jeff Colella Trio: *Letting Go* (Sea Breeze) ***

That beckoning, surging sea Bill Evans plunged himself into sometimes drowned his followers, but Jeff Colella us a sure and creative swimmer. Eschewing standard roles, bassist Eric von Essen improvises counter-melodies and drummer Kendall Kay plays with the time without losing it in this highly integrated trio. From the watery introspection of "Peace" and crystalline ring of the title tune, both by Colella, to the Jarrett-like vamps of "With The Spirit Of Joy," this is an altogether attractive and appealing album, with only a few lapses into pure prettiness.

London Jazz Journal

By Mike Shera

Jeff Colella: *Letting Go*

Jeff Colella is a new name to me, but certainly one I shall remember. He and his colleagues have produced an album of delightfully melodic piano jazz. The mood throughout most of the album is one of relaxed tranquility, with delicacies and felicitous piano voicings throughout. Bill Evans is an almost inevitable influence on a piano player such as Colella, but not an overwhelming one. Oddly enough, Colella's tune *Peace* is really quite a turbulent track, with strongly propulsive drumming. Eric von Essen contributed *Ripvagen 9*, *Harri's Mood* and *With You*, whilst *Spirit of Joy* was written by Curtis Robinson Jr. *Monk's Dream* is a delight, with a few Monkish runs, and lots of interesting things that Monk wouldn't have played. This is also the hardest swinging tune on the set. Jeff Colella's other composition on the album is the final track, a most impressive ballad, quite outstanding both in its composition and execution.

All modern piano enthusiasts are urged to obtain this album without further delay.