

Looking Back. Performers: Mike Murley, tenor and soprano saxophones; Reg Schwager, guitar; Steve Wallace, bass. Toronto: Cornerstone Records, CRST CD 143, 2014. 1 compact disc (54:47). Contents: Isfahan (6:54) – Looking Back (5:52) – The Feeling of Jazz (6:36) – I’ll Be Around (7:46) – So in Love (5:31) – I Wonder Who (5:48) – Detour Ahead (6:12) – Who Cares (3:28).

Looking Back is a 2014 release of the Mike Murley Trio, consisting of Mike Murley on tenor and soprano saxophones, Steve Wallace on bass, and Reg Schwager on guitar. It also marks the trio’s first release with Schwager, who joined the ensemble after Ed Bickert’s retirement in 2001. While Schwager’s style is distinct from that of Bickert’s, it meshes seamlessly with Murley and Wallace’s. The overall effect has been a subtle shift in the group’s sound and timbre that enriches and enlivens the core sound developed by the trio over the years with Bickert. The album, a collection of standards with one Murley original, is dedicated to the musicians Murley has worked with as a leader in Toronto.

Billy Strayhorn’s “Isfahan” opens the album. The tone is mellow and quiet. Murley plays the head, and Schwager’s comping, in tandem with Wallace’s loping-two on bass, gives the tune an easy swing feel. Murley takes the first solo, which is ripe with double time passages. Schwager continues the pace, with Wallace walking a steady bass line. As Wallace takes his solo, Schwager provides simple comping, artfully accenting the soloist’s lines.

The album’s title track is pianist Jimmy Rowles’ ballad, “Looking Back.” It opens with Murley on soprano. Bass and guitar follow the saxophone freely through the melody of this ballad, creating a gentle, mournful mood. Murley’s tone on the soprano is dark and subdued, and his lines are simple and flowing. Wallace takes the first and only solo, and carries through the dark mood with lyrical lines.

Duke Ellington’s “The Feeling of Jazz” is next. The piece opens with an easy swing and bluesy feel. Murley takes the first solo, and plays up the blues feel with triplets and blue notes. Schwager’s solo continues the bluesy groove, also picking up on the triplet motif. Wallace does not disappoint with his solo, which grooves hard and also carries a deep blues feel. All three musicians swing hard on this track, and definitely create that groove that we associate with traditional jazz. Other touches, like Schwager’s Freddy Green style comping under Wallace’s solo, complete the mood.

Murley’s melodic prowess shines in the ballad, “I’ll Be Around,” by Alec Wilder. Murley plays the head on tenor, and then Schwager takes the first solo on guitar. His double time lines float effortlessly over Wallace’s free, two-feel lines. The majority of Schwager’s solo is largely constructed of melodic lines with sparse chordal accompaniment. When Murley begins his solo, rich in double time lines and played in a full sound, the energy of the piece intensifies. Although the melody is hinted at, it isn’t until bass and guitar return to the muted, almost rubato feel of the opening that Murley returns to the head more faithfully—ssas well as changing his sound to be more muted and airy.

“So in Love,” the celebrated Cole Porter tune, is a drastic mood-and-tempo shift from the previous track. The tempo is quick but the feel is light, and the trio sails through the changes, driving yet effortless. Wallace’s walking bass lines on this track in particular exemplify why Murley (in the liner notes) refers to him as “Toronto’s answer to Ray Brown.” Murley takes the first solo, which is the perfect combination of bop-infused lines and melodic contour. The second solo is by Schwager, and while his solo definitely keeps up the intensity, he and Wallace play with time a bit more, creating an interesting rhythmic tension.

The pace and feel shifts again with the next track, Antonio Carlos Jobim’s “If You Never Come to Me.” The trio adds an unusual twist to the song, as this version retains only a hint of the bossa feel traditionally associated with Jobim’s music. Instead, the effect is almost ethereal, with a two feel in the bass and subtle chordal guitar accompaniment. The notes are all straight and even.

The group returns to the core feel of the album with “I Wonder Who,” an up-tempo swing written by Murley that opens with Wallace and Murley playing the head in unison. Murley is once again playing the soprano, but with a much brighter tone than in the title track. The solos by all of the musicians are lively and playful at points.

The tempo eases again to a ballad for the rendition of “Detour Ahead,” which features Murley playing the head on tenor with a full and open sound. His lyrical abilities are often highlighted in ballads, and the soulful lines he weaves in this solo are no exception. The other solo is by Wallace, who also demonstrates an exceptional lyrical dexterity. Murley takes an extended cadenza at the end of the piece, where he fully exploits the range of his horn.

“Who Cares,” the last song on the album, is an up swing. Murley weaves bop lines right after the head, demonstrating yet another dimension of his versatile style. The rest of the group keeps the pace with ease. Schwager takes the next solo, and also develops long bebop lines through the changes. Wallace keeps an even pace throughout the entire tune, which ends promptly and without fanfare on the final note of the head.

Overall, the interplay between the musicians is subtle and seamless. What is more, the trio members all exhibit a keen sense of melodic development. Not only does *Looking Back* pay homage to jazz in Toronto, it exemplifies the outstanding talent of these three musicians. I highly recommend this album.

Robin Desmeules
University of Alberta