



Sunnyside

Greg Reitan *Antibes* | Liner Notes by **Orrin Keepnews**

*I have been paying attention to Greg Reitan for several years now, finding him to be a pianist and composer who is already quite impressive and who seems to have a great deal of rapidly developing potential.*

The sentence just above is very much the kind of opening you might be all too accustomed to reading in the notes accompanying an album like this -- the second recording effort by a trio led by a young player who certainly would seem to have full command of his instrument, a warm sound and a fluent touch, and who, in his mid-thirties, has developed a readily identifiable personal approach to his instrument. So you could *almost* be forgiven for dismissing what I am writing here as merely hard-sell advertising copy, the kind of commodity that is by now extremely difficult to avoid on the various on-line commercial and social networks that consistently invade our homes and businesses. But I am understandably aware of one distinction between these notes and most others you're likely to come across these days -- and that difference, which at least is very important to me, is that these have been written by me.

I have by now been involved in both producing and writing about jazz for somewhat more than fifty years -- a statistic that amazes me as much as it can anyone else, and very probably reflects my stubbornness as much as my abilities. In this half-century I have been pretty consistently involved with the recording careers of a substantial number of the most creative and most challenging players available. In my earliest years of jazz activity, it was necessary for a severely underfinanced independent label (which is what almost all of us were) to make records as efficiently and inexpensively as possible. Back then, for me to write the notes for one of my own Riverside albums, instead of paying some eager young writer to do them, served two valuable purposes. It saved some important dollars, and it allowed me to sound off on behalf of artists I believed in.

This is a pattern I have followed whenever possible over the years. But in the somewhat different and often quite frustrating circumstances of today's jazz recording scene, I am not always in a position to go into the studio and produce a young artist just because I want to. In this case, there were several quite practical obstacles, including the fact that the artist and I don't have the same home base. Greg lives in Los Angeles and I near San Francisco, which definitely clashed with his quite specific ideas about the basic timing and overall planning of the project. Like quite a few of today's young artists in many areas of music, Reitan has a substantial interest in the details of the actual recording process. Over the past several years he has gradually developed a functioning home studio, and he felt it was an essential part of this project to be able to use that space as a fully relaxed and always available work place. (In addition, the room includes a well-maintained piano that has for quite some time been his favorite Steinway.)

There was no doubt about personnel. Greg had first met bassist Jack Daro and drummer Dean Koba when he moved from his home town of Seattle to begin music studies at the University of Southern California. They had first recorded together in 1995, a trio demo that made them finalists in that year's Great American Jazz Piano Competition. For an encore, they were finalists in the 1996 Hennessey Jazz Search -- and they have performed together on and off ever since. They were of course his colleagues on his previous Sunnyside album, "Some Other Time."



Reitan has built a strong reputation as a composer and arranger for both movies and television and has won a steady stream of performing and writing awards, including a 1995 Harry Warren Award for Film Scoring and the ASCAP Young Jazz Composer Award in 2002.

Eventually it became clear to both of us that this deeply personal project was one of those cases in which it made most sense, both artistically and logistically, for the artist to serve as his own producer. The most helpful role I could think of for myself was to express my enthusiasm, along with some opinions and explanatory thoughts, in the form of notes for the CD booklet.

In preparing my commentary, I did ask Greg for some standard background data ("whatever personal history, early influences, etc. you want included"), which led to a concise but overwhelming response that I am quite pleased to share with you now:

"I was born in Seattle on May 30th, 1973. While growing up there, I studied piano with Joni Metcalf and Dave Peck and improvisation and composition with drummer Jerry Granelli. I spent summers at the Bud Shank Jazz Workshop in Port Townsend, WA, where I studied piano with Hal Galper and arranging with John Clayton. Moving to Los Angeles, I graduated in 1995 from the Thornton School of Music at USC with a BM in Music Composition. I studied classical composition with Stephen Hartke, Frank Ticheli and Erica Muhl, and classical and jazz piano with Terry Trotter.

"Early musical influences include Bill Evans, Denny Zeitlin, Ahmad Jamal, Herbie Hancock, Wynton Kelly, George Shearing, Thelonious Monk, Keith Jarrett, Oscar Peterson, Vince Guaraldi, Chick Corea, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Charlie Haden. Also classical pianist Glenn Gould, and composers Aaron Copland, Igor Stravinsky, Samuel Barber and Roy Harris."

[Let me insert at this point the fact that over the years I have spent more than a little time in studios with more than half of the musicians on Greg's early-influence list, with particular emphasis on Monk, Evans, and Kelly. It is definitely my opinion that he made some wise choices as to whom to be influenced by....]

Almost from the start of his preparation for this project, Greg had been firm about wanting to utilize familiar personnel and studio. He was also determined to record the material in exactly the sequence in which it would be heard! This is certainly not a routine decision to make in advance -- most leaders and producers automatically consider each selection as a unit unto itself. Although you often might decide in advance which numbers you'll *probably* want to start with and perhaps even how to sign off, most of us prefer to wait until all the work has been done before locking-in the sequence. But not Reitan! He had his reasons, and after repeated re-listening to the completed album -- which of course is routinized exactly as he had decided in advance -- I still don't find anything I'd have seriously disagreed with. But since one purpose of these notes is to provide some insight into this artist's creative thinking, I can find no better way to proceed than by providing you with some inside looks at how Greg arrived at his conclusions:

"We had just finished recording the first album. I was reading a wonderful 1957 book, 'The Riviera: from Portofino to Marseilles,' which is full of beautiful black and white photography by the Italian modernist, Bruno Stefani. I was immediately inspired to write a new composition that I inevitably named *Antibes*, seeking to echo the elegance and beauty of the photography. At the time I was listening to a lot of Glenn Gould, particularly his interpretations of Bach, and I feel that some of Gould's music also influenced the piece. We recorded *Antibes* first, and then I planned the rest of the album around the mood and spirit of that opening composition, with the others recorded in the sequence in



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which they appear on the album. They were all recorded in a few afternoons that were spaced out over three months."

The second number, *For Heaven's Sake*, one of just two standard tunes here, is identified by him simply as "a lovely piece that has always been a favorite ballad of mine." The third and fourth tracks are both previous Reitan compositions: "*Waltz for Meredith*, written for my wife, nicely fits the mood of the album" and "*One Step Ahead* filled the bill for an up-tempo piece."

Then come three pieces by notable jazz composers, beginning with Wayne Shorter's *Fall*, originally recorded on the Miles Davis "Nefertiti" album during Wayne's mid-1960s tenure with that group. Greg felt that "this worked well as a serene, autumnal piece, a nice change of pace following the sparkling *One Step Ahead*." Then comes *Time Remembers One Time Once*, "a waltz written by my good friend Denny Zeitlin," followed by *Sympathy*, "a beautiful ballad by Keith Jarrett that its composer had recorded, in a trio format with Charlie Haden and Paul Motian, for an early '70s Atlantic album."

*September* returns us to Greg as composer, although he identifies it only as "written specifically for this album" and "a kind of sister piece to *Antibes*." Then Track 9 looks one more time at a major jazz artist serving as a songwriter, and if I had previously had any personal artistic doubts about Reitan, his version of *Re: Person I Knew* would have wiped them all away. I was well aware that Bill Evans had from time to time enjoyed inventing anagrams that could serve as reasonably meaningful song titles. This one is a reshuffling of all the letters in my name. It first appeared on an Evans album made in 1962, near the end of the seven-year period during which I was his record producer; and I have found that I can still feel hostile towards what I might consider an inadequate performance of it. This one, fortunately, is among the most interesting I have heard, succeeding in Greg's announced intentions: "I really tried to do my own thing and still stay sensitive to Bill's original vision of the piece."

Then come two more Reitan pieces, both newly written for this occasion. About *Late Summer Variations* he has noted that, "I wanted to do a solo piano piece, and it is a theme-and-variations work, partly written and partly improvised, with five short variations on the main theme. Because of the large amount of improvisation here, I think of this as a moment in time -- a reflection of the sunny Friday afternoon on which it was recorded." It is followed by *Salinas*, written specifically to serve as a bridge between *Variations* and the final number. Greg describes it as "an impression of the drive between Los Angeles and San Francisco on the Route 101 freeway, with that beautiful view of the golden rolling hills in the Salinas Valley segment of the drive."

Finally, there is *In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning*, another favorite ballad of his, about which he noted to me: "I love the 1955 Frank Sinatra album of Nelson Riddle arrangements that bears this name, and this song in particular. I thought it would make a nice, elegant, quiet ending for this project. Actually, making an album that maintained its own elegance and gracefulness throughout was always at the center of my thoughts while developing this CD. It was all very carefully planned around the opening composition, and I think I have been able to create the complete statement I had in mind."

I think so, too.

-- Orrin Keepnews (8/1/09)