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RYAN COHAN

Out of Africa

Chicago pianist-composer Ryan Cohan is unfailingly polite and courteous, traits belying the grit and determination behind his music. *The River* (Motéma), his fifth album as a leader, is his best yet. The album teems with vibrant, intelligent writing and feisty playing from a crack septet: drummer Kobie Watkins, percussionist Samuel Torres, bassist Lorin Cohen, trumpeter Tito Carrillo, reedist Geof Bradfield and saxophonist-flutist John Wojciechowski.

Superbly recorded at Chicago's Hinge studio by Rich Breen and co-produced by Cohan and perfectionist Steve Rodby, this program of original material was inspired by the pianist's 2008 tour of East and Southern Africa sponsored by U.S. State Department and Jazz at Lincoln Center.

Cohan and Bradfield, his DePaul University classmate and longtime compadre, applied for Doris Duke Chamber Music grants before the trip. They both pitched the idea to compose works tied to the African voyage, following the ambassadorial footsteps of Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong. The experience proved to be life-changing.

Cohan's music already reflected a humanitarian bent. His 2007 album *One Sky* (Motéma) included an eponymous suite subtitled "Tone Poems For Humanity," and his interest in longer-form composition was expanding. He began

yoking motivic elements with a prelude to his piece "Looking Glass" from *Here And Now* (2001), and his sponge-like intellect was absorbing many styles of music. Ramsey Lewis, impressed by his debut CD, *Real World* (1997), commissioned Cohan to write a solo feature for him fusing classical, Spanish tinged and tango. A six-year association resulted, with Cohan making contributions to Lewis' albums *Dance Of The Soul*, *Appassionata* and *Meant To Be* and composing the theme to Lewis' TV series "Legends of Jazz." Others who have sought Cohan's broad skill set include trumpeter-orchestrator Orbert Davis and his Chicago Jazz Philharmonic (Cohan himself deployed both jazz and symphonic musicians on *Real World*) and vibraphonist Joe Locke, who solicited orchestral arrangements for *Wish Upon A Star* (2013).

Despite his erudition and early enthusiasm for Bach, Chopin and Liszt, Cohan's travels in Africa as an envoy for jazz and America as a nation caused him to emphasize the importance of basic communication within his music. Such intent lies behind the symbolism of *The River*. Representing no specific channel of water per se, the theme concerns cultural as much as physical confluence. "It's a timeless analogy, I suppose," says Cohan. "The river as connecting body, always changing, always in motion. I tried to connect the pieces in the suite in a similar way."

A salient example bridges the funky "Arrival," a soundtrack to street life in Kigali, and "River (ii) Dark Horizon," which dwells on conflict in Rwanda, Congo and Zimbabwe. The city hubbub culminates in dissonance, out of which Bradfield's soprano takes a spiraling descent picked up by Wojciechowski's tenor. The two saxes encircle each other before an urgent riff underpinned by a clustery piano figure generates further tension. For "Forsaken," Cohan creates a dark, limpid pool in which Carrillo's forlorn muted trumpet floats.

"There is a lot of trust between the musicians," insists Cohan. "I have worked with them over a long period and leave plenty of space in the music for them to take risks."

Beyond complexity and craft, Cohan doesn't neglect the groove seasoning critical to winning over unfamiliar audiences at less jazz-enlightened stops around the world.

The quartet that traveled to Africa deepened their emotional investment after visiting an installation commemorating the Rwandan genocide. "We stood over a mass grave that was also like a tomb of the unknown soldier," Cohan said. "It left us speechless. As we exited, a local woman thanked us for listening to the stories and attending; we

all walked off in different directions and had to collect ourselves."

"Storm Rising" and "River (iii) Aftermath" reflect diverse tribal and political turbulence in Africa. "The Rwandan situation, in particular, solidified that our mission was to share cultures and forge positive relationships, that the world could not turn its back, that we are all accountable to stand up and speak out before such atrocities are permitted to play out," he said.

The River also illustrates positive, encouraging aspects of Africa: "Domboshava" (a gorgeously mellow homage to a national park in Harare featuring Wojciechowski's flute), "Last Night At The Mannenberg" (inspired by a mbira choir and local dance) and the meditative soprano sax feature "Kampala Moon" celebrate the natural beauties of the region and the uplifting melodies and rhythms of Shona tradition.

Cohan offers props to collaborator Rodby for his big-picture vision of *The River*. "I had wanted to work with Steve ever since I heard his work on Michael Brecker's last album, *Pilgrimage*. He instinctively understood how to get the best out of the music, masterfully balancing what needed to be left as raw and what could be tweaked in post-production."

Take note. Grammy judges: *The River* is a strong candidate. —Michael Jackson