

Pianist Matt Baker's new recording, ***Almost Blue*** (via JazzElm Music), is his fifth as a leader, but only his second since 2010 when he moved to New York City from Sydney, Australia. Baker abandoned a comfortable career to position himself in the pool of big fish who leave an international array of smaller ponds to test their mettle in the jazz capital. That it was a wise decision is evident: Now approaching 40-years-old, Baker—well-known in Australia and Europe during the '00s for an approach deeply informed by Oscar Peterson, his idol and first influence in matters of intention, execution and time feel—interacts seamlessly with young New York A-listers **Luques Curtis** on bass and **Obed Calvaire** on drums. Master guitarist **Lage Lund** augments the unit on six selections, while formidable tenor saxophonist **Joel Frahm** projects his singular instrumental voice on three.

The intersection of Baker's musical and personal journeys in New York is the subject of the 14-tune program, which Baker and eminent producer **Matt Pierson** culled from the Great American and late 20th Century Pop Songbooks. "I chose these songs because of their lyrics," Baker says. "Each one represents a certain place in my life during the period that led up to the recording. They convey the album's narrative, and have equal weight as pieces in the story."

Speaking of narrative, Baker sings on three selections, presenting his vulnerable emotionally connected Voice on the title track by Elvis Costello; Beach Boys' Brian Wilson's "Wouldn't It Be Nice;" and Canadian singer-songwriter Ron Sexsmith's "Foolproof."

Among the instrumental highlights are a beautifully re-harmonized, bittersweet trio rendering of "I'll Be Seeing You" on which Baker displays his contrapuntal prowess; a mellow, melancholy interpretation of "The End Of A Love Affair"; a stick-to-the-melody version of Jim Webb's "Didn't We"—again showcasing the pianist's mighty left hand—that puts a bright spin on giving a relationship a good shot but not quite getting there; and a stark "In The Wee Small Hours Of The Morning" that palpably brings forth the emotions attendant to, as Baker puts it, "lying in bed late at night, looking out the window, hoping this is the night when she'll call."

In 2016, a worldwide audience can witness the fruits of Baker's New York R&D as he supports ***Almost Blue*** with a new trio, including Ahmad Jamal alumnus James Cammack on bass, and the crackling young drummer Darrian Douglas. "I feel that Darrian, James and I create whatever it is we do—various meters and rhythmic 'complexities, harmonic development, textural development—in the moment together," Baker says.

Back in 2002 Baker recorded his second album, *Talkin' Soul Food*, a week after returning to Sydney from another trip to New York, taken with the express intent of hearing every set by jazz piano legend Oscar Peterson during a week-long engagement at the Blue Note. During that week Peterson befriended the intense, well-mannered youngster, and he remained Baker's friend and mentor for the remainder of his life, a fact that Baker honors with a still ongoing project devoted to Peterson's original music.

On the strength of that recording, Baker was invited to bring his trio to the 2003 Montreux Jazz Festival to serve as house band for its entire 2½-week duration. Festival founder and artistic director, the late Claude Nobs brought the trio back the next year. Baker participated in the Montreux solo piano competition from 2003 to 2005, and was hired to play solo piano for the 2006 edition of the festival. Baker represented his Swiss experience—which gave him an opportunity to meet and pick the brains of an international array of jazz celebrities, such as Herbie Hancock and Michel Camilo—with the 2006 trio plus chamber orchestra album *From An Afternoon With the Mountains*.

Moving to New York in 2010, Baker spent his first year in the 'Big Apple' networking at such jam session hubs as Smalls, Fat Cat, Cleopatra's Needle and Smoke, where he "hung out, listened, gave out the business card, and had stacks of people not call me," while also studying with pianist Taylor Eigsti, whom he met on a 2009 New York visit. Aside from watching Oscar Peterson perform live that whole week at the Bluenote, which Baker recounts as being as great a lesson as any, he has also studied with Mulgrew Miller, Benny Green, Fred Hersch, Aaron Goldberg, Jacky Terrasson, James Williams, Ralph Sutton and Ella Fitzgerald's life-long accompanist Paul Smith.

In 2011, Baker self-recorded *Underground*, with top-shelf generational contemporaries: trumpeter Jeremy Pelt, tenor saxophonist Dayna Stephens, bassist Joe Sanders and drummer Greg Hutchinson. It received a 3½-star *DownBeat* review, favorable notices in *Jazz Times* and *Jazz Wise UK*, and reached #26 on the US JazzWeek charts. "I really wanted to have a solid career beneath me when I did my next album," Baker says, and he's achieved that aspiration.

His sideman credits include sideman engagements with, among others, 7-string guitar icon Bucky Pizzarelli, tenor saxophonist Joel Frahm, bassist Marco Panascia, and vocalists Tierney Sutton and Judy Collins. In addition to refining his presentation of Oscar Peterson repertoire, which he has presented at Birdland and different venues in North America and abroad along with sidemen Jim Cammack, Jerome Jennings and vocalist Brianna Thomas, Baker has played numerous trio engagements that feature his own repertoire conception in diverse rooms like Birdland, The Blue Note, Cleopatra's Needle, Gin Fizz, Iridium, Kitano, Bemelmans, Le Cirque, the Zinc Bar, as well as The Side Door and Scullers Jazz Clubs.

"The Australian piano whiz.."
Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*, Oct 2014

"Baker has a playful approach to melody, particularly on the standards that he interprets with Joe Sanders and Gregory Hutchinson."
Shaun Brady, *DOWNBEAT* Magazine, March 2012

"Swings confidently ... full of clever reharmonizations and hip syncopation. The threesome demonstrates seamless group chemistry."
Bill Milkowski, *JAZZ TIMES*, April 2012

"Matt Baker is one of the most respected and versatile pianist-composers yet to come out of Australia. Baker's playing sounds as though it belongs on ECM. An exceptional pianist."
Tony Hall, *JAZZ WISE UK*, April 2012

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