

JAMES RYAN LIVE IN MUMBAI

Album review by Eric Myers

Label: Rippa Recordings

Personnel: James Ryan (tenor saxophone), Scott Tinkler (trumpet), Steve Hunter (electric bass), Ken Edie (drums).

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This album, featuring four virtuosic Australian jazz musicians, was recorded in Mumbai, India, in 2009, but released on Rippa Recordings only in July, 2020. An outstanding album, full of inspired playing, it should be better known. It resulted from an invitation extended to Australian saxophonist James Ryan to bring a group to India, on the Bay of Bengal in eastern India, for the fourth edition of the Chennai Jazz Festival. This festival took place over three days, with a mix of workshops, interactive sessions and performances.



PHOTO CREDIT SEEMA SANGHI

The tour was organised by Seema Sanghi, a jazz enthusiast and apparently a friend of the Ryan family. She secured the invitation from the festival and applied to the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (DFAT) for financial support to underwrite the tour. Ryan had little to do with this process, as Sanghi handled DFAT, and the tour was administered by Music Viva Australia.

This unique quartet which, other than Ryan on tenor saxophone, included Scott Tinkler (trumpet), Steve Hunter (electric bass), and Ken Edie (drums), performed

three times only: once for the JazzGroove Association in Sydney before they left Australia; once in Chennai, where they also did a workshop; and once at the Blue Frog club in Mumbai. The final performance was recorded and now appears on this CD. *James Ryan Live in Mumbai* therefore documents a quartet that never performed again, as its members were living in different states of Australia. Courtesy of covid, Ryan had time to prepare the album for release in 2020.



James Ryan: his intensity on tenor is not unlike that of the late Mark Simmonds...

In recruiting the three musicians to join him on this short tour, Ryan chose well. This high-energy quartet is a reminder of Mark Simmonds Freeboppers, the group which recorded the two-CD album *Fire*, and won an ARIA for best jazz album in 1995. To suggest such a comparison isn't outrageous, since the instrumentation – trumpet, tenor saxophone, bass and drums - is duplicated. Moreover, Tinkler himself played on the *Fire* album; Ryan's intensity on tenor is not unlike that of Simmonds (although Ryan says he never heard much of Simmonds' playing); and Hunter had two stints with the Freeboppers, once in the late 80s and again in the mid-90s, for about a year in each case.

The album consists of five very hip compositions, three from Ryan, and two from Hunter. Ryan lays down the gauntlet from the outset with an exciting soliloquy which morphs into Coltrane-like high squeals and low foghorn sounds. He is joined by Tinkler for some judicious collective improvisation two out, before Edie and Hunter join in, with a R & B-like time-feel and Ryan's tune *Hey Which Way* is played. It features a characteristically biting theme, played loosely but basically in unison.

Hey Which Way evolves characteristically. It doesn't conform to the conventional head-solos-head structure. Once Tinkler starts his solo, a typical display of his stamina and technical virtuosity, there is the feeling that anything is possible, reminiscent perhaps of the way in which Miles Davis constructed his music in live performance in the later stages of his career. The rhythm section's time-feel is

generally broken up or ambiguous, and soon Hunter and Edie drop out to give Tinkler space to express himself unaccompanied. Hunter then plays a short solo, bringing the temperature down, before the head of the tune re-enters, leading into another fierce Ryan solo before the head is played again.



Scott Tinkler: a strident example of unaccompanied technical virtuosity in live performance... PHOTO CREDIT MARC BONGER

When musicians vary the head-solos-head convention, I often wonder how the music is put together. Who takes the decisions that are necessary? I have already drawn attention to the playing of the rhythm section. Hunter and Edie adopt a number of approaches throughout the album. They might provide an ambiguous time-feel which disguises the pulse; perhaps turbulence or mayhem when necessary; perhaps an underlying groove in swing-feel or eight-feel. Occasionally one of them drops out, or indeed both Hunter and Edie can drop out entirely, to give the front-line players space to take the spotlight. In these ways the music is afforded variety, and is prevented from sounding repetitive.

The unpredictable ways in which these compositions evolve speak to the “sound of surprise” element in jazz but, at the same time, I feel they work well on the basis of a high degree of empathy between the musicians. The players make decisions on the fly, perhaps by osmosis, perhaps on the basis of shared ideas, which enable the elements in the music to fall into place. The musicians effortlessly move from section to section, seamlessly changing gears.

This album highlights the role of individual virtuosity in jazz. All four musicians are capable of brilliant one-out instrumental soliloquies, unaccompanied for several

minutes, and this is perhaps the main reason why the audience in the Blue Frog club was obviously mesmerised. Sometimes it is not obvious how the other musicians decide to re-enter the fray, to provide accompaniment and support for the soloist. But the direction of the music is unerring.

I have heard very few jazz albums which provide a more exciting trumpet/saxophone combination than Ryan and Tinkler together. They are both strong examples of unaccompanied technical virtuosity in live performance. On this extraordinary album one can feel the power in their playing.

In his review of Tinkler's now legendary 2007 solo album *Backwards*, the writer John Clare was justified in describing his "astonishment at [Tinkler's] resources of imagination and technique... His unique open tone... is released with shattering power in blazes of staccato speed; in massive blasts and long shining notes that weave and sustain melodic shapes."



Any jazz musician capable of playing like this in live performance can bring the house down. This largely explains the universal adoration which trumpeters coming after Tinkler have shown for his capacities.

Outside of his *Backwards* album, *James Ryan Live in Mumbai* surely provides one of the best recorded examples of Tinkler's unique ability. Putting him together with Ryan, possibly the most exciting tenorist in Australian jazz since Mark Simmonds, was serendipitous and inspired.