



MARK GINSBURG & RYAN GROGAN: OCEANS TOGETHER

Album review by Eric Myers

Label: Earshift Music

Personnel: Ryan Gogan (piano); Mark Ginsburg (saxophones); Brett Hirst (double bass); Fabian Hevia (percussion). Additional musicians: Hannah Grogan, Ryan Grogan & Mark Ginsburg (background vocals); Davi Mello (guitar, in track 6)



The first thing to notice about this album is that visually it's an immaculate product. The graphic design and artwork are highly attractive, with excellent black-and-white photographs, including a great shot of the four principal musicians which dominates a handsome ten-page CD sleeve. This suggests a level of professionalism and attention to detail in the area of production values, which is somewhat unusual in the jazz albums which come my way for review.



A coloured version of the B & W shot on the sleeve, L-R, Ryan Gogan, Fabian Hevia, Mark Ginsburg, Brett Hirst... PHOTO CREDIT MARK ZWORESTINE

It's not surprising to discover that the pianist/composer Ryan Grogan, a South African who arrived in Australia in 2006, is a partner at Klang Studios in Sydney, which facilitates music for TV series, television commercials, documentaries, short films and games. The sort of expertise available through such music industry activity has no doubt been brought to bear on *Oceans Together*. Saxophonist Mark Ginsburg, the quartet's co-leader, is also a South African who, based in Australia since 1982, has subsequently forged a career which has taken him into several international arenas, mainly in Asia.

In the past *Oceans Together* might have been considered a "concept album", in the sense that a certain mood is sought, and is intended to prevail throughout the album. That mood here is laid-back, gentle and not too frenetic, in keeping with the album's expressed inspirations, which are highly personal. The 12 compositions on the album – eight by Grogan and four by Ginsburg - are sweet, carefully written, thoughtful and melodic throughout, featuring warm harmonic changes. Solos by all four musicians are well-paced and ruminative, underlining what is ultimately a restful mood.



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Fabian Hevia's role as a percussionist, replacing the normal drum kit, is the key to the album's overall ambience. Personally I welcome this innovation, as some contemporary drummers, even when playing softly, cannot resist the conversational approach which has crept into drumming styles over many years, and can be intrusive in the sound-mix. With a variety of percussive sound sources to choose from, Hevia expertly gives the music great variety track by track, and leaves the music very open throughout, in accordance with the minimalism which is now increasingly finding its way into Australian jazz, no doubt through the subliminal influence of The Necks. Hevia is perhaps primarily responsible for the fact that all instruments, beautifully recorded, can be heard as clear as a bell.



A great double bass player, Brett Hirst (above) produced solos which resonated... PHOTO CREDIT MARK ZWORESTINE

I get the feeling that each musician is playing with heartfelt understatement, that is to say, within themselves. Trying to impress the listener with technical feats would defeat the purpose of this contemplative album. Two aspects of the music are notable: firstly, there are background vocals on some tracks, provided by Grogan, Ginsburg and Hannah Grogan, which may involve a doubling of the melody in unison, or perhaps a written connecting section in harmony. Used sparingly these passages add a lovely element of warmth to the music whenever they occur. Secondly, while all solos are beautifully played, I found those from Brett Hirst, a great double bass player, especially resonated with me. While Grogan and Ginsburg are the nominal co-leaders, I feel all four musicians are equally responsible for the way the music hangs together throughout. It's comforting to know that there's room in Australian jazz for such an exquisite album.