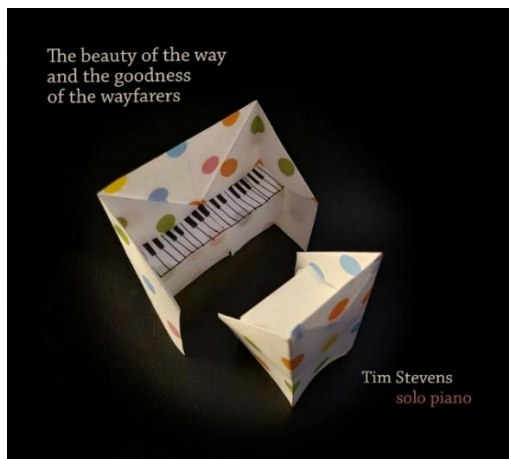


THE BEAUTY OF THE WAY AND THE GOODNESS OF THE WAYFARERS

Album review by Eric Myers

Label: Independent

Personnel: Tim Stevens (solo piano)



For some reason, I've always been drawn to the music of Tim Stevens. His distinctive appeal as a jazz pianist dates from his emergence in the 90s with the Browne Haywood Stevens Trio, with drummer Allan Browne and bassist Nick Haywood. Their two albums *King, Dude & Dunce* (1995) and *Sudden in a Shaft of Sunlight* (1998) impressed many people, including the artistic director of Italy's prestigious Umbria Jazz festival, Carlo Pagnotta, an influential figure in international jazz. While in Australia in 2000, Pagnotta heard the two BHS trio albums in my car as I drove him around Sydney from place to place over several days. Later he heard the trio live at Wangaratta, and invited Stevens to bring the group to the next Umbria Jazz, to take place in Perugia, Italy, in July, 2001.



L-R, Allan Browne, Nick Haywood, Tim Stevens... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Pagnotta, with a long history of assisting emerging jazz artists who took his fancy, offered to pass on the two BHS albums to his close friends, Bruce Lundvall at Blue Note, and Tommy LiPuma at Universal. To cut a long story short, Stevens performed at Umbria Jazz in 2001, but not with Melbourne's Browne and Haywood. Instead he took with him two Sydney musicians, bassist Mark Lau and drummer Simon Barker, playing music unlike that of the BHS trio.



Carlo Pagnotta, artistic director of Italy's prestigious Umbria Jazz festival...
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

As a result, the connection with Pagnotta went no further, for reasons which have never been clear, although I have my theories. Stevens certainly had the talent to make an impression internationally, as many other Australian jazz musicians have done subsequently, but this golden opportunity for him to be in the vanguard of what became a movement in later years went awry in Perugia. Perhaps a future biographer will throw light on this puzzling episode in Stevens's early career.

Post-Umbria, and for that matter post-BHS, Stevens has produced much music over the last 20 years, most of which I haven't heard. Three of his albums have come my way, however, and I reviewed them in *The Australian: I'll Tell You Later in December: Christmas Music and Improvisation for Solo Piano* (2017); *With Whom You Can Be Who You Are* (2018) for jazz trio and string trio; and *There'll Be Some Changes Played* (2021) from his piano trio.

I've just re-read those reviews, and they are glowing; I'm happy to stick by them. Admittedly they were based on a small sample of Stevens's considerable output, but they were enough to indicate that his music still has great appeal, at least to my ears.

The Beauty of the Way and the Goodness of the Wayfarers is Stevens's seventh solo piano album. Of course I have only limited knowledge of his artistic development

over two decades. From the 80s and well into the noughties, reviewers such as I were often assisted by articles and interviews appearing in several publications which would throw light on the *oeuvre* of an artist like Stevens, and give us signposts to look out for. However, such pieces on jazz musicians have virtually disappeared from the quality media, which are now full of relentless articles on rock and pop musicians, reflecting the fashionable view that it is in those commercial genres where the art music of today is primarily found.



Tim Stevens at the piano... PHOTO CREDIT ROGER MITCHELL

If this is a querulous, over-long introduction to a review of Stevens's latest album, it is true that I was thinking of offering the editor of AJAZZ a one-sentence review, which might have gone something like this: "Listening to *The Beauty of the Way and the Goodness of the Wayfarers* has given me a great deal of pleasure." End of story.

In an ideal world, this might have been possible. However, I have a page to fill.

Listening to this album one is struck by the intelligence in the music. This is not surprising, as Stevens, now aged 50, is a very intelligent man, obvious from his website <http://timstevens.com.au/> which reveals him as an exceedingly perceptive analyst of music, movies, himself... whatever. There Stevens has apparently poured out his thoughts over many years. I've now subscribed to his newsletter, and will return to read more carefully what he's written on a host of subjects. It's interesting that he rejects the influence on his pianism of Americans such as Keith Jarrett and Bill Evans; rather he stresses the debts he owes to Australian musicians such as Tony Gould and Paul Grabowsky. Moreover, has there ever been an Australian jazz musician who's articulated more baldly the angst in trying to market original music to an unresponsive public?



On his blog, Stevens stresses his debts to pianists Tony Gould (above) and Paul Grabowsky (below)... GOULD PHOTO CREDIT TO COME; GRABOWSKY PHOTO CREDIT ADRIAN VAUGHAN



On this album notice the prolific unfurling of musical ideas. Here is a musician bursting with creativity, a reminder that during 2016, he observed a New Year's resolution to write an original composition every day during that Leap year – an exercise in self-flagellation perhaps, but which he achieved. “It is the only time in my life I have kept a new year's resolution,” he writes, “and I have the 366 tunes spiral bound in twelve books, one per month.”

In recent years, as the release of albums has become a flood, Australian composer/musicians are now likely to articulate in their liner notes at length what has inspired the music. In Stevens' case it is primarily friendship. "This music is... for Tabitha [Halley], whose company I have enjoyed for over 30 years", writes Stevens. "Tab and I met in the last years of high school. She is my closest friend in the world after my wife and our kids, and I thank God for her."

The album has 12 tracks, including nine Stevens original compositions, and two free improvisations. One standard, the Gershwin tune *How Long Has This Been Going On* completes the album. I found the two free pieces difficult to relate to, possibly owing to my own shortcomings as a listener; others may consider them supreme works of art. Otherwise, I enjoyed most the slower tunes, particularly the slowest tune on the album *The Vault*, where the piece's minimalism enables the lyricism in Stevens' playing to shine through.



George Gershwin: Stevens' treatment of his "How Long Has This Been Going On" is utterly beautiful...

I found the Gershwin the most agreeable track on the album; the treatment of this great composition is utterly beautiful. It clearly illustrates what has been present in Tim Stevens's music, dating from the 90s: his precious gift for melodic beauty.
