

OLA GJEILO / *Stone Rose* / 2L (2007)

*Stone Rose* is one of the most enjoyable piano releases I've heard in the last few years. Norwegian-born New York City resident Ola Gjeilo finds just the right note (no pun intended) on every track and the recording is a joy to experience, whether played in the background or listened to directly, the latter allowing you to absorb the nuances in his playing. Gjeilo manages to reinvigorate a formula that can easily come across as stale or tired (i.e. accessible melodic solo and ensemble piano music) injecting new life, creativity and sensitivity. Maybe it was his dual inspiration (he cites living in both New York City and L.A. as impacting his music). Maybe it's simply that the guy is such a damn good piano player. I listen to a lot of piano music and *Stone Rose* truly stands out in the crowd. From its tasteful monochromatic shades-of-blue didgipack to the great liner notes (an interview with the artist) to the brevity with which Gjeilo works (eleven of the fifteen tracks are under four minutes in duration, proof positive that it's the quality - not the quantity - of notes that matters most), everything falls into place on the CD.

While there are a number of lively pieces on *Stone Rose*, I'd still consider this a relatively quiet and subdued work, and as such it's a good choice for late night listening at lower volumes. In that way, it mirrors the much-overlooked *Rivers* from pianist Patrick Leonard which also juxtaposes jazzy uptempo numbers with reflective tone poems.

"Snow in New York," which opens the album, is one those livelier numbers. Gjeilo's fingers fly over the ivories with speed and dexterity but they alight with a soft delicacy, never overpowering the instrument. "North Country" is a slow and pleasantly meandering piece, reminding me of the more laid back tracks *Rivers*. "Michelle" swings back to a faster tempo, but again the thrust of Gjeilo's playing is restrained even when his actual working of the keys is at a rapid pace. I prefer this style of piano music, frankly. Some albums I review feature the artist hammering away at the keys with a fierceness and intensity that I sometimes find off-putting. No matter how softly one would play these albums, they just seem too "loud." Gjeilo's music can be tailored to the listener's mood or environment, to a certain degree, simply by adjusting the volume, e.g. up for driving and down for nights by the fire or while reading.

While some cuts on the album feature guest artists on flugelhorn (Tom Barber), violin (David Coucheron), and cello (Johannes Martens), the main thrust of *Stone Rose* is solo piano. "The Line" features a slinky blues influence while "The Hudson" is an elegant and sad cello/piano duet played at a stately tempo and "Roxbury Park" reminds me of that breezy jazz that permeates Bruce Hornsby's playing. While "The Line" and "Roxbury Park" have their loud moments, for some reason, they don't jar me as has happened with some piano releases.

The title track plays out as a minimal melancholic tone poem, whereas "Sidewalks" (a violin/piano duet) carries an air of remembrance and nostalgia. "North Country II" is a stunner, combining sparse piano, violin and flugelhorn with a great blend of late night blues and sorrowful jazziness. Flugelhorn joins with piano once more on the closing "Serenity," and you might be surprised at the jazzy tone of that piece based on its title, but Gjeilo's playing holds things nicely in check so they don't get out of hand.

The liner notes state that Ola Gjeilo has been composing, performing and touring (alone and with his ensemble) for a long time, but I think this is his first release as a solo artist. If so, I hope it's not his last. *Stone Rose* does not come across as a freshman effort; it's as assured, confident and mature a recording as I've heard in the last few years. Apparently, the sky is the limit for this extremely talented artist as he, hopefully, moves forward with his recording career.

Rating: Very Good+ / Bill Binkelman / New Age Reporter