

Christoph Luty's G pedal reaching out for C Bb and F before returning to G are the quintessence of simplicity and taste, perfectly matching Ryan's approach to this evergreen, and her ability to transport us into her deeply felt musical universe.

"Bésame Mucho" was written in 1940 by Consuelo Velásquez, just before her 20th birthday. In an interview, she said that when she wrote the song, 'a pure product of (her) imagination', she had never been kissed! Ms. Velásquez died in 2007, at the ripe old age of 84 (hopefully much kissed by ASCAP or BMI!).

Dmitri Tiomkin and Ned Washington wrote "Wild Is The Wind" in 1953, for George Cukor's eponymous movie. This version is very much on par with Shirley Horne's rendition. Just like the late singer, Ms. Ryan masters with aplomb the difficult art of ultra-slow tempi, perfect diction, limpid intonation, great sense of dynamics and utter respect for space and time. Special mention should be made yet again of Tamir Hendelman's pianism. Instead of merely 'backing' the artist, he seems to be co-interpreting the song — almost duet fashion, thereby enhancing its pathos and poignancy. With Jeff Hamilton's discrete support, this piece is nearly seven minutes of story-telling magic.

Showing her apparent penchant for songs drawn out of movie scores, Ryan segues into "Moonlight", from the remake of the movie Sabrina. Marilyn and Alan Bergman's lyrics and John Williams's music are uncannily reminiscent of the prolific collaboration of the two lyricists with Michel Legrand. The song is given a lilting bossa-nova treatment, attesting to the singer's musical eclecticism. In this piece which she co-arranged, Ms. Ryan succeeds in touching the listener's heart and soul because she is so credible in the way she 'sing-tells' the words. They come across as deeply felt; reinforcing the feeling and gravitas they beckon — contrary to most of today's performers who sing the notes but not the words. This brings to mind Lester Young, who claimed he never played a tune before learning the lyrics!

Reverting to her exuberant sense of swing, Ms. Ryan regales us with her own sexy version of Cy Coleman and Carolyn Leigh's "The Best Is Yet to Come". With Tamir Hendelman at the helm, the trio accompaniment sounds like a small orchestra! The same holds true of "I Just Found Out About Love", with the rhythm section and Holloway's tenor soaring and cooking, while musical phrases fly between the soloists with gusto and exuberance.

The wonderful singer's musicianship is brilliantly featured in "You and the Night and the Music", which is treated as a slow and languid ballad until the rhythm section steps in, doubles the tempo and sparks start flying. Ms. Ryan's sultry voice and Red Holloway's hot and gritty saxophone solo bring the song back home in the original slow tempo with Holloway's horn shadowing the singer until the very last word!

The real cooker of the album is undoubtedly "I Know that You Know," with each member of the group being given a chance to shine, while Ms. Ryan stokes the fire.

The artist's mesmerizing contralto voice is

brought to the fore in Johnny Mandel and David Frishberg's poignant and heartbreaking "You are There." The pathos of the song is further enhanced by the graceful presence of Carol Robbins' harp as sole accompaniment. This is another real gem interpreted in a most intimate setting.

In 1951, Nat King Cole sang Ray Evans and Jay Livingston's "Never Let me Go" in the movie *Scarlet Hour*. More than half a century later and after a host of other versions — both vocal and instrumental, Jackie Ryan brings the song back refreshed and rejuvenated, with its essence and depth remaining perfectly intact. After a haunting vocalise in guise of introduction Ms. Ryan instantly draws us deep into her musical soul. As always, her perfect sense of time and space are omnipresent in this heart rendering classic.

This marvelous set is sadly brought to a close via Alec Wilder's "While We Are Young." With the sole accompaniment of Larry Koonse on guitar, the singer carries home with overwhelming sincerity the composer's message that 'every day is Spring while we're young' and 'time is too dear to lose and too sweet to last'.

Heed that wise advice! Don't waste any time! Rush to buy this CD! Apart from showcasing the infinite talents of the very beautiful Ms. Ryan, this album is masterfully produced; the sound quality is superb, and the packaging and art work are first class. 'Who could ask for anything more?' ...except for another album. Very soon please!



## VINSON VALEGA

**AWAKE** — Consilience Productions, [www.cslproductions.com](http://www.cslproductions.com). *Luftmenschen; Awake; Fog; This is What Democracy Sounds Like (Part I); Undertow; Ed Blackwell; This is What Democracy Sounds Like (Part II); Stacked Sienna; Sputnik; This is What Democracy Sounds Like (Part III); The Trend is Your Friend; Take Time For Love*.

**PERSONNEL:** Vinson Valega, drums; Terell Stafford, trumpet; Anton Denner, alto saxophone, flute, piccolo; Chris Bacas, tenor and soprano saxophone, clarinet; Jon Cowherd, piano; Josh Ginsburg, bass.

By Dave Miele

The Vinson Valega Group is a fine modern jazz ensemble with a solid assemblage of composers/performers. Each member of the group has something unique to contribute and the result is a tight band that plays well-crafted original music with a great degree of interactive excitement. Valega is a spectacular drummer, delivering just what each track needs without over-powering or taking center stage at the expense of musicality. Perhaps it's the fact that

Valega composed so many of the originals that allows him to play with such humility and serve the band so well. The latest release from this engaging band is entitled *Awake* and should not be missed by any fan of modern jazz.

Vinson Valega is the composer of seven of *Awake*'s twelve tracks. With interesting melodies, harmonies and song forms, Valega proves himself to be just as competent with a pen and paper as with a pair of sticks. The first of the drummer/leader's originals is the title track. This tune begins with a polyrhythmic vamp, not unlike John Coltrane's classic "Equinox". There is a lighter sensibility to Valega's tune, however, which begins with a piano trio introduction before the horn melody. The gentle medium swing tune features trumpeter Terell Stafford and pianist Jon Cowherd in extended solos. "Ed Blackwell", another of Valega's compositions, is a straight eighth note tune with a Latin-esque vibe. The melody is played in unison by Stafford and tenorist Chris Bacas. Valega steps to the front with some tasty drum breaks, while Bacas and altoist Anton Denner trade solos. Cowherd is also featured.

One of the most well arranged of Valega's originals is "Stacked Sienna". The ballad features muted trumpet during a regal introduction, followed by a beautiful melodic rendition by Cowherd and Denner. This time Denner plays flute. Also displaying Valega's compositional skills is a suite of songs which are spaced sporadically throughout the tracks. Entitled "This is What Democracy Sounds Like", the theme is split into three sections. This is a guttural, earthy piece, which features percussion mixed with a variety of woodwinds, which often quote patriotic songs in their interactive improvisations. The final tune composed by Valega is the funky "The Trend is Your Friend", with an infectious groove and a slick melody.

In addition to providing wonderful melodic renditions, accompaniments and playing Valega's songs with taste and style, the members of the Vinson Valega Group also contribute several originals to *Awake*. From Anton Denner comes the opening track, "Luftmenschen", a gentle tune with a bossa-nova flavored groove. Denner, Stafford and Cowherd are all featured in improvisations. Bassist Josh Ginsburg contributes the funky "Undertow", featuring Stafford who plays wonderfully with the mute. Finally, Chris Bacas adds "Sputnik", a medium-up swing tune on which the band stretches out and swings hard.

Vinson Valega is obviously much more than a drummer. He is a composer, able to invent interesting and engaging melodies and harmonies which provide the perfect vehicle for extended improvisations. He is a band leader with the considerable skills to know how to pick the musicians that will make his music as effective as possible. Of course, Valega drives this band hard from behind his drums. Valega has found the right musicians and put the music before the technical feats many drummers love to play (and yes I admit it, we love to listen to them too). In so doing, he has created a modern jazz release that is most certainly not just for drummers. *Awake* is most definitely worth a listen.