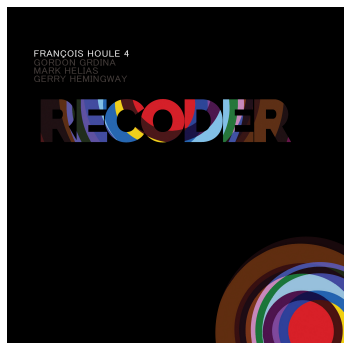


JazzWord

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François Houle 4
Recoder
Songlines SGL 1632-2

A new configuration with old associates, Canadian clarinetist François Houle's *Recoder* is a 15 track dissertation on expanded improvisational ideas interspaced with duo excursions focused on pastel moods. Houle, who now lives in Basel, convened the quartet with American drummer Gerry Hemingway, also a Swiss expatriate; New York bassist Mark Helias, who adds second clarinet passages to the frequent brief interludes; and Vancouver guitarist Gordon Grdina, whose Houle affiliation goes back 15 years.

The harmonized or contrasting basso and clarion clarinet duos are notable for expressing perceptive individuality such as adding kazoo-like peeps on "Interlude 3". But the time-stretching sense that comes into play with all four contributors creates more notable programs of unexpected contrasts and canny juxtapositions. For instance Houle's reed variants stand out when framed by guitar fraills that move from near country-rock picking to Middle Eastern string-churning on "Big Time Felter". The string clips and echoing clarinet harmonies featured there are also expressed as a cascading andante romp and finally blended on "Canyamel" as they evolve above a walking double bass line. More crucially from a foreground-background perspective "Bowen" demonstrates how a bone-shaking, slow-paced finale was frog marched by clattering drums from an introduction involving lighter but honed clarinet licks in dramatic tandem with a melodic double-bass line.

The quartet's evolution and resolution are most clearly delineated on the title tunes, which is also the CD's lengthiest. Metal, wood and cymbal slaps from Hemmingway join in textural variations from Houle's tongue flutters, until juddering contributions from the other players set up a contrapuntal challenge. Answering this uncommon juxtaposition, the narrative completion manages to be both sweeping and stimulating.

A realized experiment utilizing each quartet member's skills, *Recoder's* program deserves to be repeated. But perhaps the abrupt interludes could be dropped when that happens.

—Ken Waxman

Track Listing: 1. Prelude 2. The Black Bird 3. Interlude 1 4. Big Time Felter 5. Interlude 2 6. Canyamel 7. Interlude 3 8. Recoder 9. Interlude 10. Bowen 11. Interlude 5 12. Morning Song 1 (for Ted Byrne) 13. Interlude 6 14. Baseline 15. Postlude

Personnel: François Houle (clarinet); Gordon Grdina (guitar); Mark Helias (bass and clarinet) and Gerry Hemingway (drums)