Dave Douglas’s *Strange Liberation*

Trumpet player, Dave Douglas, is perhaps the most individualistic of players on the Contemporary jazz scene. He is essentially a melodic player, but his solos hit his listeners from far-left field. Douglas’s recent installment to his ever-widening musical discography, *Strange Liberation*, explores the idea of freedom and control in music. It is a poetics of in-and-out playing. In the liner notes, Douglas writes, “It has been said that freedom without limitations is meaningless. This band explores the border of freedom and bends the rules with a compelling logic and passion.” Douglas expands on the idiom without forsaking the “musical.” He continues, “It is strangely liberating to put myself in a new situation where I am forced to admit that I have never done this before and, in some sense, have no idea what I am doing.” This openness with regard to the necessary risks, is evident throughout the album.

*Strange Liberation* exhibits the unique perspective that is essential to jazz. Douglas borrows from a number of sources inside, and outside, the jazz tradition. The track, “Skeeter-ism” uses a Monkian rhythm. This is also apparent on “The Frisell Dream,” which serves as a guide. Bill Frisell's opening guitar riffs recall the musical style of rockabilly, in the humorously titled “Rock of Billy.” Here the rhythm section sets up a nice sizzling groove behind Douglas’s swinging trumpet and Frisell’s tasty chorus, which effectively uses distortion. This is solid, swinging
jazz with just the right use of experimental effects. Both Frisell and Uri Caine, who plays “Fender Rhodes” on this album, give Douglas and Chris Potter, on tenor sax, an interesting and varied harmonic base to launch from. Together they evoke the enigma of dream and memory, which is essential to this record.

A key song is “Just Say This,” which expresses, harmonically, a balance of melancholy and hope. The sound from Douglas’s muted trumpet is like the call from a weary traveler in the desert who has seen what others can only imagine, the ideal city or the unutterable nightmare, and returns with message of this song. Frisell creates a sense of empty spaces, the desert, but it is also a plea. Chris Potter’s sax cries out for hope, for the necessary strength. The band closes in a unison passage, hope triumphs over despair, there is a ray of light in the distance. Of this song, Douglas writes, “Just Say This’ is a melody that came to me while walking around Manhattan in September 2001. It was hard to finish the piece, coming as it does with such a heavy burden of tragedy and suffering. For me the music was the only possible comment about such a horrible crime.” Where no words are possible, music offers an alternate medium of expression that speaks without words, saying itself and nothing more.

As a collective statement, “Single Sky,” with its harmonic subtleties, effective unison passages, and solos, is a powerful opening track, even though it only clocks in at just over two minutes. Frisell’s excellent guitar work, on another gem, “Mountains From the Train,” allows the listener to actually hear those train wheels shedding sparks on the tracks. The song drifts into a meditative space. At the song’s conclusion, one is no longer on a track, on the ground, but fading into the distances, along the road, above the earth, in the air. Douglas’s solo on “Seventeen” is rhythmically strong and soulful, as well as equally restrained and piercing. It is Douglas’s homage to the great, Blue Note sound. Douglas’s concept of the music is utterly unique. He incorporates Middle-Eastern, rock, and Classical sounds and, through his own individual alchemy, generates something fresh and totally contemporary. When listening to his music,
one realizes that if one had any doubt about the future of jazz, Douglas’s music would make you think twice.

Recordings
