



Christopher Burnett Quintet
The Standards, Vol. 1 (ARC2925)

No matter how modern or abstract or unclassifiable jazz can get in the 21st century, standard tunes remain a touchstone for a great many players, across widely varying jazz idioms and sub-genres. When someone improvises on a standard, we hear how they sound, but we also hear how they hear. Where do they place the beat? Where does their harmonic imagination lead? What melodic secrets do they reveal? What inner aspect of their soul do they choose to lay bare? From Buddy Bolden onward, jazz improvisers have taken the tools and vernacular of their day, of their musical community, and sought their own truth within that common framework.

Such was the goal of alto saxophonist **Christopher Burnett** on *The Standards, Vol. 1*. Yet the decision to record a full album of standards was made after much reflection. Every player faces the challenge of making a standard his or her own, rather than relying on past interpretations, and this was a concern. There's also the risk of standards, in Burnett's words, becoming caricatures: "In this era of information overload," he says, "[playing standards] can become ego vehicles to play loads of memorized melodic permutations and other intellectually derived constructs over the changes."

CHRISTOPHER BURNETT QUINTET

160+5

THE STANDARDS

VOL •1•

With *The Standards, Vol. 1*, Burnett sought to capture a straightforward and honest encounter with the songbook tradition and the modern jazz canon. In this he had solid support from a working band with pianist **Roger Wilder**, bassist **Bill McKemy** and drummer **Clarence Smith**, expanded to include guitarist **Charles Gatschet** on four tracks, as well as **Stanton Kessler** on flugelhorn for Herbie Hancock's enduring "Dolphin Dance." (Wilder and Smith were both featured on Burnett's 2014 ARC release *Firebird*.) Kessler, on two additional tracks, appears in a larger ensemble with two flutes (**Terri Anderson Burnett**, **Freda Proctor**), clarinet (**Samantha Batchelor**) and baritone saxophone (**Aryana Nemati**), Gatschet on guitar as well, as Burnett wields the arranger's pen and summons some truly colorful reed-plus-rhythm section sonorities. Top engineer **Bill Crain** captures it all beautifully in Studio A of his **BRC Audio Productions**.



“I purposely wanted to have both male and female musicians, as well as representatives from all adult generations, lending their voices to the music and arrangements,” Burnett remarks. “I believe the balance of male and female artistic voices, as well as artists of various ages and experience levels, adds a realism to music of this depth. In performance the music will more inherently parallel real life.”

He adds: “The synergy of my quintet and simpatico with my vision as leader was achieved over a couple of decades working with most of the artists on this album. I’m fortunate to have some of the best performing and teaching artists in my working band. They are all leaders, but they embrace my project and vision without hesitation. And the way they support each other is mesmerizing to me, because they’re all listening intently to what is happening during each beat of each measure. I hear the buy-in and trust in these performances.”

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A Kansas City area native, Burnett has worn many hats in his 65 years, and this breadth of experience informs his artistry at every level. During a 22-year Army career he honed his musical and administration skills and also met his wife and musical partner, flutist Terri Anderson Burnett. In the decades following military service he cofounded the Artists Recording Collective (ARC) label; served as Marketing Director, Director of Operations and Acting CEO of Kansas City’s American Jazz Museum; and established the nonprofit Burnett Music Foundation as well as the publication *Jazz Artistry Now*, running album reviews and other varied content on a regular basis (this writer’s work included).

“I am a genuine child of the Civil Rights era,” Burnett reflects, “born in the year of *Brown v. Board*. I was living my life parallel to the societal paradigm that inspired the creation of this golden era of the music. What a great example it was for me as a young Black kid growing up in the very small town of Paola, Kansas during the tumultuous ’60s and ’70s. I actually hear the paradoxical nature of our culture in this American-born music. It’s not ‘pop’ music and it’s not intended to be. It’s purposeful and based in Black people expressing themselves artistically and taking themselves seriously.”

As a KC-based alto player, Burnett is of course hyper-aware of KC’s own Charlie Parker, who assimilated the language and logic of standard tunes like no one else. “I came up in military bands and am not musically part of that direct lineage from Bird,” Burnett offers, “but I do personally know musicians who are part of this royal American musical line.” When approaching standards, therefore, Burnett proceeds in a combined spirit of humility and open possibility. “These standards are truly works of art in terms of compositional sophistication and the cultural impact they continue to have. They also typically require a very purposeful engagement to play.” Accordingly, Burnett chose each one with care, following his heart all the way, saving the album’s one original, “Freedom Flight,” for the end.



The leadoff “**Dolphin Dance**” is from Hancock’s perennial *Maiden Voyage* of 1965, and for Burnett the tune is something akin to “what Charlie Parker did to blues changes in relation to most standards of that era. It’s harmonically complex, moves through several keys, and is through-composed rather than common AABA song form. As a musician, you have to know what you’re dealing with. It is unapologetically serious modern jazz concert music. I discovered *Maiden Voyage* in 1972, when I was in high school and working at our local music store. The album is a great representation of the paradox of the ‘60s in my opinion. The theme is the sea, with music written by a 24-year-old genius who was attempting to ‘capture the graceful beauty of playful dolphins.’ On one hand society was saying Black people were inferior, but at the same time, Herbie was afforded this wide artistic freedom that was so optimistic. By the time I discovered this music, our society was becoming a bit more open among people in my generation in the KC area.”

“**Corcovado**,” by Brazil’s legendary “Tom” Jobim, is the first of two songs to feature Burnett’s arranging for expanded ensemble. It was ubiquitous for Burnett growing up, but the version that caught his ear was the 1962 treatment by Cannonball Adderley and Sergio Mendes, heard while he was studying at the Armed Forces School of Music in 1977. “I loved that entire record and have bought it many times over the years,” he recalls. “Another sax student and I were into transcribing alto players like Cannonball, Sonny Stitt, Bird, Sonny Fortune and Lee Konitz. I love bossa nova by Jobim, João Bosco and Ivan Lins because their work melds the art and craft of composition.”

Cleo Henry’s “**Boplicity**” is from Miles Davis’ groundbreaking *Birth of the Cool* and stamped by the sound of the Davis-Gil Evans partnership. “I remember hearing Miles Davis as a very young boy in the terminal at Rhein-Main Air Base [now defunct] in Frankfurt, Germany,” Burnett recalls. “This was during the Cold War. We five kids and our mom were an Air Force family traveling on unaccompanied military orders to join my father, a serviceman assigned at Toul-Rosières Air Base [also defunct] in France. I believe the Davis-Evans sound was significant to the Third Stream movement that deliberately melded classical and jazz sensibilities. ‘Boplicity’ is very interesting melodically and harmonically, and it requires a degree of

maturity beyond the notes. If I didn't have Roger Wilder's support as my pianist, I would likely not have programmed it."

"**Windows**" is by Chick Corea, like Hancock one of many piano greats to come out of Miles Davis' bands. "I first heard my favorite rendition of 'Windows' on *Inner Space* around late 1974 or spring of 1975. Much later I heard the version with Stan Getz on *Sweet Rain*. I began composing and studying orchestration in the late '70s in the military music program, and by 1983 I'd been on the arranging staff of several military bands. I wanted to know what it was like to be a composer outside of the military, so I wrote to Chick and he answered me with an encouraging reply. Many years later at the jazz museum in KC I finally met Chick in person when we hosted him and Gary Burton with the Harlem String Quartet in 2012. I introduced myself, told him about the letter and he said, 'Yeah, you were the Army composer, right?' I was stunned that he remembered me by name. That told me that there is truly another level of brilliance in his music."



Charlie Parker was one of the first that Burnett heard play Jerome Kern's "**All The Things You Are**" (ATTYA); the others were Paul Desmond and Jackie McLean. "This composition was a rite of passage in the eyes of the older cats I knew," says Burnett. "Marcus Hampton, the nephew of Slide Hampton and cousin of Lionel Hampton, was my barracks mate when I first went to the Army band in Germany, and he took me to my first jazz jam sessions in Munich on weekends when we weren't working. I played on mostly blues and modal tunes because I was still learning. I remember hearing those cats playing ATTYA

and knew I couldn't sit in on that because I couldn't remember the changes well enough. Hamp taught me how to read changes and use my ear. I never played ATTYA with him back then, but 40 years later he moved to the KC area and we reconnected — rarely does something like that happen among military colleagues.”

“**Freedom Flight**” is a newer composition of Burnett's, with an airy melodic motion that gives it a standard-like feeling. “Everything I write is for someone special to me or a milestone event that motivates me in life,” Burnett explains. “‘Freedom Flight’ is for our son, Seth. He is a fighter pilot in the US Air Force and flies the F-35 jet. He started as a weapons systems officer in the two-seat jets, then moved to the pilot seat after subsequent training. All of the CbQ musicians liked this tune when I brought it in to read during our residency at Black Dolphin in KC. They enjoyed the unique chord progression and melody, and that's what I'm after — I enjoy when something I compose connects with people. Like the standards do.”

— David R. Adler



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