

The HOT Box



Steve Lacy/Mal Waldron

Let's Call This ... Esteem

SILTA 0901

★★★★½

First things first: Go buy this disc, if you still can. It's been reissued in a numbered, limited edition of 999, and they won't last long. The music is strong enough to justify the as-yet rare reissuance on CD from original issue on CD (first released on George Haslman's SLAM records back in 1993, the year it was recorded). No idea why the Italian label Silta is making such a small batch, but that makes getting it soon that much more imperative.

Lacy and Waldron worked together very often, made wonderful records frequently, commencing with the pianist's role on Lacy's 1958 Prestige LP *Reflections* and stretching through various Waldron-led bands in the '70s up to a couple of trios with bassist Jean-Jacques Avenel in 2002. Their first duo recording was in 1971, and it was in that perfectly reduced setting that they made the majority of their recordings.

What made this pairing so ideal was a shared aesthetic sensibility, a profound love of mystery and, of course, a deep understanding of Thelonious Monk. The dark, enigmatic character of Waldron's piano is a neat foil for Lacy's systematic, intellectually rigorous soprano. Here they approach familiar material: Thelonious Monk's "Monk's Dream," "Evidence," "Epistrophe," as well as Ellington gems "In A Sentimental Mood" and "Johnny Come Lately," Lacy's "Blues For Aida" and Waldron's "Snake Out." The latter, a 14-minute opus, offers much of what makes the twosome so special, a particularly searing saxophone solo urged on by Waldron's probing, dramatic, richly chromatic and persistently churning piano. Waldron's askew funk piece "What It Is" (incorrectly listed as "What Is It") finds him hitting the pedal tone, building fantastic tension as only he could. —*John Corbett*

Let's Call This ... Esteem: Introduction And Let's Call This; Monk's Dream; In A Sentimental Mood; Snake Out; Blues For Aida; Johnny Come Lately; What It Is; Evidence; Epistrophe; Esteem. (78:14)

Personnel: Steve Lacy, soprano saxophone; Mal Waldron, piano.

» **Ordering info:** siltarecords.it

CDs	CRITICS »	John McDonough	John Corbett	Jim Macnie	Paul de Barros
Mose Allison <i>The Way Of The World</i>		★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★
Jamie Cullum <i>The Pursuit</i>		★★★★	★	★★★★	★★★★
Plunge <i>Dancing On Thin Ice</i>		★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★	★★★★
Steve Lacy/Mal Waldron <i>Let's Call This ... Esteem</i>		★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★	★★★★½

Critics' Comments

Mose Allison, *The Way Of The World*

Some good new songs ("Modest Proposal," "Ask Me Nice") from the master of wry, though some of them could use another verse or two. Great backup band, and the sometimes garrulous Mose mostly behaves himself on piano. When he sings "Once In A While," he makes you stand up and listen. —*Paul de Barros*

Not trying to be anything else, this is a straight-up solid Mose Allison record. That's a good thing in my book—he's a master of cool message delivery, George Carlin as jazz singer, the observing hepcat dizzied by a world akimbo. —*John Corbett*

Time has corrupted that sleek voice a bit, but this affair puts all the classic Allison elements in a row. From idiosyncratic vernacular (how many jazz songs mention "neurons"?) to offhand rhythmic motifs (the blues don't get much jauntier than Mose), it works just like his classic stuff does; sweet, sharp and seductive. —*Jim Macnie*

Jamie Cullum, *The Pursuit*

With his poised, finger-snapping swagger and classy voice, Cullum's Darrin-esque talents are made for the kind of terrific penmanship Frank Foster offers him on "One Of Those Things." Alas, it's a mirage, followed by a series of overmixed, pop-oriented non-sequiturs. —*John McDonough*

Uneven album with some tastelessly overproduced tracks, but Cullum gets extra points for having forged a distinctive, youthful style that projects plausible emotions and doesn't just retro-mimic Sinatra and company. The upbeat drive of "You And Me Are Gone" is a good example. —*Paul de Barros*

Each time I listen to *The Pursuit*, I find it more distasteful. From the faux Rat Pack opener to the terrible lyrics of "Mixtape" and "Wheels" to the cloying contemporary Billy Joel/Sting upbeatness. It doesn't know what it wants to be, but each of its possible identities is worse than the last. —*John Corbett*

Steve Lacy/Mal Waldron, *Let's Call This ... Esteem*

An excellent dialog between two charter avant-garders in maturity. Anchored in Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk much of the way, Lacy's lonely lyricism is astringent and unsentimental without being harsh. Nowhere lonelier than on "Aida," which is so atomized it almost evaporates. Otherwise, a crackling and fully engaged partnership. —*John McDonough*

At first I thought it was a tad stiff, but then I recalled how Waldron's left hand and Lacy's linear quacking always did have an odd symmetry. Their rapport isn't in question, however—each knows where the baton has to be handed off—and the good fortune of having this once ultra-rare title back in availability land is sweet. —*Jim Macnie*

I always thought Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter could have benefited by listening to these guys, just to hear how high the bar had already been set for a truly thoughtful, improvised piano/soprano duo. In this good but not stunning 1993 live set from England, the pair shines on Monk's "Let's Call This," "Evidence," which sounds downright romantic, and Waldron's dervishy "Snake Out." —*Paul de Barros*

Plunge, *Dancing On Thin Ice*

McGrain, Green and Singleton make good use of the unusual format, two horns temperamentally and tonally matched, bassist capable of pushing. The tunes have interest aplenty, but it would be nice to leave the tonality behind a bit more and venture out into the open terrain the compositions imply. —*John Corbett*

The more I listened, the more found it to be wan. The playing is a bit measured and the dynamics a bit staid. Then all of a sudden the kaleidoscope turned and I began hearing it as chamber music—texturally daring, rhythmically dapper chamber music. Under that awning the ensemble's earthiness was impressive, unmitigable. Wonder how others hear it? —*Jim Macnie*

Tenor and trombone create a scrupulously pristine musical pastel, reminiscent of Stan Getz and J.J. Johnson, perhaps, but with a far more risky and adventurous agenda. In both harmony and counterpoint, the music moves inside a structured sense of miniature ensemble, all nicely motorized by Singleton's bass. But the electronics of "Machine" are ugly and boring. —*John McDonough*