

“Michael Gregory Jackson has long been one of my favorite musicians. We came along around the same time and I have always considered him to be one of the most significantly original guitarists of our generation with his own distinctive sound and point of view. I am always curious to know what he is doing and where his inspiration has taken him next.”

Pat Metheny 2015

*Politiken Denmark

“After Before” is an excellent CD that steams with fresh spontaneous energy and variation, but also leaves place for spacious poetry and some surprising ballads featuring Jackson’s light-textured voice. Especially remarkable is the organic spark that flows between the musicians, and Jackson’s very special, angular and virtuoso approach to the guitar adds a special personality to the recording. - Christian Munch-Hansen, Politiken Denmark 2015

* Gapplegate Guitar and Bass Blog

Michael Gregory Jackson, if you need to know, occupies a space in the jazz guitar world that is wholly original and extraordinarily schooled in its steady-state singularity. There is nothing derivative about Michael's playing. He has always been a school of one and he continues to be, though there is never a standing still. There is a funky kind of leverage to his soloing on this one, along with a scatter overall fullness when he feels that. After Before is a new step along the way, deserving to be numbered among his very best albums, in ways that hang together as "new," very much new. Highest recommendations! - Grego Applegate Edwards Gapplegate Guitar and Bass Blog 2015

*Jazz Special, Denmark

"AFTER BEFORE oozes quality and is experienced as elevated and uplifting, to the point where one can replay it again and again if one misses clarity and substance in the world of music. Very soothing by all means- even down into the technical details: the microphone-technique, mixing, production, dynamics and sound-definition has class. Clarity Quartet is exactly the right name. AFTER BEFORE should ring right into the worldly environment for jazz of the highest caliber." - Peter Rahbek, Jazz Special, Denmark, December 2015

* Gapplegate Guitar and Bass Blog

A new Michael Gregory Jackson album always promises to be an event. After Before is no exception. His highly original guitar wielding is given an excellent setting with the current members of his Clarity Quartet: Niels Praestholm, bass, Simon Spang-Hanssen, tenor and soprano sax, and Matias Wolf Andreasen, drums. There is cohesion and spirited togetherness in this band. They run through some extraordinarily worthwhile original compositions, including a couple of those inimitable songs Michael writes and sings, existing in a lyrical place all their own.

But there is of course a new jazz contemporary thing happening with the band as well, as you expect from Michael.

There is nothing derivative about Michael's playing. He has always been a school of one and he continues to be, though there is never a standing still. There is a funky kind of leverage to his soloing on this one, along with a scatter overall fullness when he feels that.

The band is very simpatico, each in his own way a voice of distinction. Together they make very beautiful music.

Michael Gregory Jackson, if you need to know, occupies a space in the jazz guitar world that is wholly original and extraordinarily schooled in its steady-state singularity. After Before is a new step along the way, deserving to be numbered among his very best albums, in ways that hang together as "new," very much new. Highest recommendations! -Grego Applegate Edwards

* Ni Kantu Music Blog

"New Haven born guitarist and composer Michael Gregory Jackson has been a vital, if not often discussed, part of creative music for the better part of forty years. From his early work with reedist Oliver Lake and trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith to proto-Black Rock group Signal, to his recent work with Danish improvisers in both a "power trio" and larger ensemble formats, Jackson has a diverse and captivating discography that skirts free music, soul, and art-rock". - Clifford Allen

* Down Beat:

"One of the most lyrical musicians working today...singularly personal and arresting and one of contemporary music's few genuine poets... Jackson's daring, darting vocal is so serene yet intense that one is hard-put naming a contemporary vocalist of similar grace and power."

* Jazz Special:

"Michael Gregory Jackson's music is spiritual and holds the light – even in the darkness...This is how the music is: it contains a will to dive into the deepest layers of human life, but is at the same time also a tribute to life itself. A sound painting that covers the diversity of life itself." -Jakob Baekgaard - 2013

* Rolling Stone:

"By the time he was twenty-one Michael Gregory Jackson was already one of the most original jazz guitarist to emerge since the Sixties".

* Rolling Stone:

“Michael Gregory Jacksons’ “Heart and Center, with it’s completely original synthesis of influences ranging from Stravinsky to Duke Ellington to Hendrix to Earth, Wind, and Fire is unlike anything that’s been heard before.” -Robert Palmer

* All About Jazz:

“The opening “Clarity” (the title also contains a graphic element not reproducible here) begins with terse acoustic guitar arpeggios, keening flute and tenor, and then moves through an evenly-spaced upward tone row, following along a path outlined by Smith’s concept of rhythm units. The shock—at least to those solely weaned on improvised music—comes when Jackson spins out a delicate, soulful tune with a vocal delivery reminiscent of a young Stevie Wonder. It’s a short sung poem that meanders along a burbling sonic brook, but its effect is extraordinary, immediate and unlike anything else before or since in improvised music.”

* CKCU FM:

“Guitarist Michael Gregory Jackson – Clarity: Avant-garde music seemed always to come in two phases over the century of Jazz history. The first phase would be considered as the wild phase while the second phase is much quieter and immensely more structured. Be Bop was followed by Cool Jazz, and the wild Free Jazz of the ‘60s was followed by an almost classical wave of cooler Free Jazz called Post-Free and even going way back Ragtime is now considered as a classical music after starting in minstrels shows and many other unstructured and infamous contexts.

Guitarist Michael Gregory Jackson falls into this category with a combination of vocal and instrumental works, some even reminiscent of Chet Baker. His association with both wild and immensely structured musicians like Anthony Braxton, Sam Rivers or Chico Freeman provides ample illustration of this phenomenon.” –Bernard Stepien

* Q Magazine:

“Jackson has that rare combination of virtuosity and versatility, able to play the guitar whiz...then slip easily into hugely commercial cuts. Michael Gregory (Jackson) is, quite simply, the business.” –Q Magazine

* Trouser Press:

“Take Bowie’s sophistication, add Prince’s flamboyance, and mix with plenty of originality. Michael Gregory (Jackson) writes crisp, vibrant songs, and sings them like it’s a matter of life and death.”

* Spin:

“The songs...realize Michael Gregory Jackson's own theoretical musings about the fertile musical possibilities created when applying blues and jazz sensibilities to rock.”

* Music Revue:

“A highly distinctive and beautiful CD of originals...his own unique style that synthesizes jazz, pop and soul...filled with romantic longing and smoldering passion.”

* The Advocate:

“Michael Gregory Jackson's high tenor voice calls to mind Smokey Robinson, Sting or Ben Harper as it flows with his guitar riffs...He doesn't back away from the difficult and sometimes raw themes connected with love and loss. Lays bare the sinews of human emotion. Gregory's honesty and hypnotic sound mixes are unabashedly mellow.”

* Sunday Republican:

“Jackson's voice recalls vintage Prince, Curtis Mayfield and Aaron Neville...There's little doubt that Gregory remains a stringman supreme.”

* Record:

“At a certain point Jackson comes spinning out of an emotional wringer, and takes a beautifully berserk guitar solo. The dynamics are unbeatably exhilarating.”

* Metroland.Net:

“Towards the Sun picks up with graceful aplomb as if there were no gap in time at all. While fans of soulful '70s and '80s artists (Stevie Wonder, Lionel Richie, etc.) will find easy entrance into Jackson's music, it's also filled with subtle surprises that acknowledge his background in the gleefully iconoclastic fringes. All is not as it appears, with layering and compositional flourishes embedded in the songs, revealing themselves in slyly gentle ways. From the graceful modulations of “If I Only Had a Minute” to the thick guitar dazzle of “Love's Parade,” this is an album filled with rich singing, inventive playing, and alluring, mesmerizing and cliché-free hooks.”

SELECTED REVIEWS:

MICHAEL GREGORY JACKSON CLARITY QUARTET "AFTER BEFORE"

Politiken, Denmark

"After Before" by American cult-guitarist and singer Michael Gregory Jackson's Danish version of his Clarity Quartet.

Michael Gregory Jackson has been on the scene since the seventies and has explored all kinds of music: pop, electric fusion and ethno-funk, but always with a special relation to the black avant-garde jazz and a very open attitude to genres and improvisation.

"After Before" is an excellent CD that steams with fresh spontaneous energy and variation, but also leaves place for spacious poetry and some surprising ballads featuring Jackson's light-textured voice.

Especially remarkable is the organic spark that flows between the musicians, and Jackson's very special, angular and virtuoso approach to the guitar adds a special personality to the recording.

Christian Munch-Hansen, Politiken Denmark 2015

MICHAEL GREGORY JACKSON CLARITY QUARTET "AFTER BEFORE"

A beautiful and really soothing cd-release by guitarist Michael Gregory Jackson and some of the most soulful and experienced Danish musicians around. The band plays straight from the heart: saxophonist Simon Spang-Hanssen, the always profound and grounded Niels Praestholm, bass and the responsive and supportive Matias Wolf Andreasen, drums.

Starting with a frisky and rather free composition dedicated to Ornette Coleman we move directly to something intimate, melodic, warm, sing-able and folk-song inspired, before wrestling in an almost free-form approach and further explorations. We find beautiful, soulful melodies and lightning theme, that are much more than empty phrases; they also represent excellent ensemble-playing.

First of all there is an intense and loving cohesion between people that are primarily in the business for the music and the joy of playing. They all assume responsibility for the ideas that are thrown in the air and bring them all the way to the goal. The music is delivered with such evidence that it attains superiority, but all the time we sense the humility of the artists in relation to the now, that they are managing, which means everything in good jazz.

AFTER BEFORE oozes of quality and is experienced as elevated and uplifting, to the point where one can replay it again and again if one misses clarity and substance in the world of music. Very soothing by all means- even down into the technical details: the microphone-technique, mixing, production, dynamics and sound-definition has class. Clarity Quartet is exactly the right name.

AFTER BEFORE should ring right into the worldly environment for jazz of the highest caliber.

Peter Rahbek, Jazz Special, Denmark, December 2015

On Michael Gregory Jackson's new work • June 13, 2013 "Liberty"
by Art Ensemble Syd with Michael Gregory Jackson
Embla Music & Experience (EME) 1302

I'm always interested in hearing music that reminds me that we are all somehow "Children of Ornette Coleman." What I mean is musicians who may reflect differing aesthetic sensibilities yet share a common principle: multiple events can take place at the same time—not necessarily linked through shared harmony or pulse. In this musical world, players can share musical space, finding a way to conceptually if not literally remain "in tune." From this perspective the idea of playing in unison might be taken non-literally, allowing each musician to start on a different pitch, each one expressing her or his individuality yet doing so in service of the collective. This is the democratic impulse of playing together as a group yet never sacrificing one's unique voice.

As a general principle, I don't write reviews of recordings. I think of myself as a musician who is interested in exploring the musical history of my colleagues. But when I received a writer's copy of Michael Gregory Jackson's new CD "Liberty," performed by Jackson and Art Ensemble Syd, I thought that I might make an exception to honor such fine work that is indeed a "child of Ornette." "Liberty" is alternately delightful and somber, sometimes displaying both qualities at the same time. The music is deeply touching and even heart breaking. It defies category (yay!). Michael Gregory Jackson's aesthetic brings together such an eclectic array of styles and approaches that it is hard to imagine anyone not finding something here to love. And I cannot stop listening to this recording. It is that good.

The recording opens with the infectious energy of an anthem “Liberty part one.” As the tune unfolds, four band members simultaneously play interwoven solos, all sharing the same musical space. Guitarist Michael Gregory Jackson, saxophonist Simon Spang-Hanssen, and violinist Heine Steensen, and flutist Thorstein Quebec Hemmet deliver what might be thought of as one part New Orleans early jazz, another part Ornette Coleman “harmolodic” synchronicity, and a third part jam band party. This collective solo section gives way to a slow, dreamy violin solo, with the initial up-tempo pulse never departing from the background. The pulse gradually moves back up front, ultimately awaiting the return the original theme.

“Liberty part 2” presents the counter theme, a calm refrain played in unison by the horn players, backed by Jackson, who plays a series of arpeggiated chords, each note spaced broadly apart. (Think, maybe, of John McLaughlin’s comping on the early Mahavishnu Orchestra recordings). The pulse from “Liberty part one” continues—and after the opening “part 2” melody repeats—is ready and waiting to support Jackson’s fluid, angular guitar solo. The counter theme repeatedly returns as a refrain, ultimately bringing the tune to a close.

“Gimbals” begins with a sparse electric guitar and bass duet (Niels Praestholm on bass), each of the duet partners filling in holes left by the other. Occasionally the two come together. Soon, Jackson and Praestholm are joined by drummer Matias Wolf Andreasen. The music begins to cook when the horn players jump in (and when I say “horns,” I’m generally including the violin), each playing variants of two-note figures. These all coalesce to craft a closing melody built upon and linking these tiny phrases.

“Undercurrents (a requiem for the victims of Hurricane Katrina)” is a somber ballad introduced by a violin solo. It is accompanied by repeated two-chord guitar gestures. A delicate melody follows, juxtaposed with light drumming, suggesting martial music. This is capped with a refrain, a winding, chromatic melody played in unison by the horns. The somber tone continues through Spang-Hanssen’s saxophone solo and then Jackson’s guitar solo, each spiced with hints of a more aggressive feel, rhythmically pressing against the beat. Each solo ends with the refrain, ultimately returning the melody. The juxtaposition of moods: somber and maybe pastoral and more rapid and forward pushing is unsettling. Surely this is the point.

The next two tracks offer a change of pace from what has preceded. "Citi" is a sparse, abstract sound collage. It suggests a very minimalistic collective improvisation, which heats up rhythmically towards the conclusion. "Down" is a beautiful ballad, sung by Jackson. It begins with the words: "I've come to a place, where my hope is wearing thin, Where within my strength is crumbling, where I'm falling down again, I'm here in this place, all choices seem the same, Where my heart knows only pain, where I'm crying, in the rain, Washes over me, in a violent, tangled, swirling sea, I'm lost, Shadow in the mist, no will to resist, Down and down and down I fall, down." The musical setting of the lyrics heightens the sense of loss and desperation.

"Clarity 4" seems as connected to the opening four tunes as it serves as a coda to "Down." The angular stop-start melody has a somber feel and is played in unison. The melody is followed by overlapping, fragmentary duets, with ever-changing partners. Increasingly, larger numbers of voices are heard in the mix. After a while, the playing becomes more abstract yet is held together by a shared container. Tension periodically builds, each time ultimately collapsing into quiet unison or silence. The opening melody returns to close out the tune.

In contrast, "8-33" begins with a simple melody played in unison, so slow and fragile that it can barely be sustained. After a while, the melody is joined by a dramatically contrasting staccato guitar figure, suggestive of a detective thriller. Soon, the drums share the energy of the guitar and the horns show fractures in the unity of the melody. The texture breaks apart with a brief, rapid saxophone solo. Then, the horns take on some of the energy and pulse of the guitar, only to return to their previous slow pace. The opening melody returns, no less fragile than when we first heard it.

The set concludes with another ballad for solo acoustic guitar, "For My Mother." This melody is ornamented with virtuosic solo runs and figures. They add depth without getting in the way of the elegance of the melody. This is a beautiful conclusion to a deeply affecting, often heart breaking and beautiful musical journey. --Bob Gluck Jazz Author

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“Liberty Art Ensemble Syd with Michael Gregory Jackson”
–Jazz Special (Denmark) June 2013

Art Ensemble Syd is a relatively new ensemble, established by bassist and composer Niels Praestholm and flutist Thorstein Quebec Hemmet to develop knowledge about jazz and improvised music in the southern part of Jutland, Denmark and the town of Sonderborg in which the ensemble is located.

The ensemble has energetically launched several musical projects, working with many different artists, among others Fenger and German trumpet player Stephan Meinberg.

The greatest scoop so far though is the cooperation with poet, soul singer, guitarist and avant-garde composer Michael Gregory Jackson, who participates on the CD "Liberty" performing a series of his own compositions.

Freedom is the title and also a keyword concerning Michael Gregory Jackson. Neither he nor the ensemble let themselves be restrained by musical styles or conventions.

Here is everything from the subtle acoustic solo hymn "For My Mother" to the polyphonic title composition "Liberty" where flute, distorted guitar, hard swinging drums and folkloristic violin merges into a higher unit.

The ensemble can play both quiet and abstract focusing on the instruments sound texture and with a funky physical groove. This is music that goes into both body and mind.

Michael Gregory Jackson has, as composer and instrumentalist several sources to draw upon and his musical diversity is of great benefit to the ensemble. The ensemble, on its side, understands to deal with the many shifts in atmosphere and sound. Along the way both frantic city and remote jungle is conjured and the listener is confronted with human tragedy in "Undercurrents, a requiem for the victims of Hurricane Katrina" as well as universal existential pain in "Down" where falling works as a poetic picture of human forfeiture.

But Michael Gregory Jackson is never lost in the dark.

His music is spiritual and holds the light - even in the darkness - as he sings "Come on and lift me up/ I've falling down again"

This is how the music is: it contains a will to dive into the deepest layers of human life, but is at the same time also a tribute to life itself. A sound painting that covers the diversity of life itself." -- Jakob Baekgaard, Jazz Special (Denmark) June 2013

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Michael Gregory Jackson
Clarity ESP-Disk 2010 (1976)

In the musical climate of 2010, the fact that a diverse range of musical styles and approaches can be combined is something often taken for granted. Creative music has long recombined musics from various non-Western sources as well as jazz and Western art music. While not always successful, improvised music has been brought together with contemporary popular music, such as indie rock and electronica. There is something hinted at by merging different traditions—that some musicians and composers are, at their loftiest, trying to get ever closer to a universal music. Others might put it more simply—that the sounds heard in their heads are not satisfied by what is currently available given the extant musical boundaries.

Guitarist, composer, improviser and songwriter Michael Gregory (Jackson) is a figure who paved the way for the Black Rock movement in the 1980s, recording for Arista and Island and heading the power-trio Signal (with drummer Pheeroan AkLaff and bassist Jerome Harris).

Jackson's first LP as a leader was recorded in 1976. This session, *Clarity*, shows a slightly different direction, as he was then simultaneously involved in the New Haven coffee shop folk scene and creative improvisation. Here, Gregory is joined by regular associates, reedman Oliver Lake and trumpeter/multi-instrumentalist Wadada Leo Smith, as well as tenor saxophonist David Murray across a set of seven original compositions.

Clarity was first issued as an LP on the tiny Bija imprint and this ESP-Disk licensed reissue is its second incarnation on CD (oddly, no note of its original label is included here). In addition to vocals and guitars, Gregory contributes bamboo flute, marimba, chimes and other percussion to the date.

The opening "Clarity" (the title also contains a graphic element not reproducible here) begins with terse acoustic guitar arpeggios, keening flute and tenor, and then moves through an evenly-spaced upward tone row, following along a path outlined by Smith's concept of rhythm units. The shock—at least to those solely weaned on improvised music—comes when Jackson spins out a delicate, soulful tune with a vocal delivery reminiscent of a young Stevie Wonder. It's a short sung poem that meanders along a burbling sonic brook, but its effect is extraordinary, immediate and unlike anything else before or since in improvised music. Gregory follows this with chunky chordal blocks, expanding and contracting as trumpet, tenor and flute carve a cottony rhythm line towards the piece's conclusion.

A similar lyricism, while not espoused vocally, imbues "A View of This Life," seemingly built off the sound-rhythms and enunciated capsules of the title piece. It's rare to hear David Murray in such a measured and particulate context, but he navigates the complex intervals and tiptoe pace of the theme sans bluster. Though the tune may be built on improvisation—indeed, the naturalness of the quartet's progression through the material gives an open quality even as it's clearly through-composed.

"Oliver Lake" is a duo for guitar and curved soprano saxophone, sharp and knotty staccato passages butting against areas of equally extreme calm. Gregory's guitar virtuosity is readily apparent, scumbling phrases into grays and browns with the use of a volume pedal (apparently an influence on Bill Frisell), and almost immediately returning to plucked pirouettes.

There is one solo guitar piece on the disc, a fantasia for 6-string and environmental reverb recorded live in Los Angeles, "Prelueoionti," which nods at players like Leo Kottke, Sandy Bull, and John Fahey's "Approaching of the Disco Void." The melodies and intervals still tie back into ensemble composition, but Americana and East European folk music are equally evident as Gregory unspools his phrases.

The lengthy "Clarity (4)" is the most open-form piece, employing extended passages of free improvisation that grow out of the tune's soft pan-tonal written opening. The phrases at the outset are short—coiled tenor growls, muted brass whine and dive-bombing flute encircled by swelling gongs and metal percussion. Short recurring thematic elements return, grounding the improvisation and maintaining a diffuse tonal center, even as Murray lets rip with unbridled tenor squall, a jubilant ferocity taken in stride with the accompaniment of flutes and chimes. A searing but short alto/trumpet duet pulls even more greatly at the edges of the piece, Gregory joining in with a pitch divided electric guitar before the closing melody appears.

"Iomi" uses a very simple series of pitches altered through tempo shifts, and it's this bald-faced simplicity that often works best in Gregory's music. Even as the interpretation of that simplicity might draw out timbrally complex, acrobatic improvisations, what is at the heart of the music is something centered and direct.

These early investigations have granted a quality that Gregory's music retains; his current trio Clarity-3, with drummer Kresten Osgood and bassist Niels Praestholm, fuses the melodic/rhythmic units of earlier work within a contemporary jazz-rock form. Rarely is a vision so wide-ranging encapsulated by such basic tenets as clarity.

Tracks: Clarity; A View of This Life; Oliver Lake; Prelueoionti; Ballad; Clarity (4); Ab Bb 1-7-3 Degrees; Iomi.

Personnel: Michael Gregory Jackson: acoustic and electric guitars, voice, wooden flute, electric mandolin, timpani, marimba, percussion; Oliver Lake: alto and curved soprano saxophones, flute, talking drum, cowbell; David Murray: tenor saxophone; Wadada Leo Smith: trumpet, soprano trumpet, flugelhorn, Indian flute. -- Clifford Allen All About Jazz

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Guitarist Michael Gregory Jackson – Clarity 1976 (re-released 2010)

Avant-garde music seemed always to come in two phases over the century of Jazz history. The first phase would be considered as the wild phase while the second phase is much quieter and immensely more structured. Be Bop was followed by Cool Jazz, and the wild Free Jazz of the '60s was followed by an almost classical wave of cooler Free Jazz called Post-Free and even going way back Ragtime is now considered as a classical music after starting in minstrel shows and many other unstructured and infamous contexts.

Guitarist Michael Gregory Jackson falls into this category with a combination of vocal and instrumental works, some even reminiscent of Chet Baker. His association with both wild and immensely structured musicians like Anthony Braxton, Sam Rivers or Chico Freeman not to mention landing a job as a professor at the New England Conservatory provides ample illustration of this phenomenon.

Bernard Stepien CKCU FM

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Michael Gregory Jackson: Clarity (2010)
By RAUL D'GAMA ROSE, Published: August 12, 2010 AAJ

Michael Gregory Jackson is the quintessential modern troubadour. He may not sing in a Romance language, but he turns his instruments of choice—guitar and voice—into a powerful language that enables him to recreate the sensuous, reverential and spiritual literature that, in turn, enormously enhances his songbook.

Jackson turns on the charm on Clarity, a short, but memorable album that provides a telling snapshot of the musician's art. He is joined here by the power trio of alto saxophonist Oliver Lake, tenor saxophonist David Murray and trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith—who, at times, almost eclipse Jackson's enormous presence. This is gracious on the part of the guitarist, who often moves the music to his whims and fancies.

Clarity possesses some of the most exquisite music that Jackson has ever written and performed. The extended version of "Prelueoionti" sees the guitarist leaping off into the unknown with great, galloping lines that move breathtakingly forward, gaining mass and momentum as the song progresses. Shaped like a mini concerto, "Prelueoionti" is a masterpiece of changing tones and colors that Jackson delivers magnificently on his sonorous acoustic guitar. The extended version of the title track, "Clarity (4)," is a moving exploration into the world of the guitar, but this time Jackson is also joined by the saxophonists and Smith. The result is a moving, probing exposition of a song that suggests vast possibilities—many more than it actually brings forth—as much of the improvisation takes off with lines that vanish into infinity before they are brought to fruition.

Jackson's vocals are uniquely soft. His burnished voice glazes the lines as he announces with sharp clarity, only to soften the lines as they fade away at the end of each bar. This style of vocalizing makes his voice singular, and enhances his image like that of a black troubadour, wending his way through life as he picks up the shards of broken glass that appear in his path. Thus his ability to soften the music as he bends notes and twists phrases is often at beautiful odds with the harsh nature of his musical journey. There may be many more albums that showcase Gregory's music with greater finesse, but the elemental beauty of these songs that he shares with Lake, Murray and Smith, is timeless.

Track Listing: Clarity; A View of This Life; Oliver Lake; Prelueoionti; Ballad; Clarity (4); Ab Bb 1-7-3°; IOMI.

Personnel: David Murray: tenor saxophone; Oliver Lake: flute, soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, talking drum, cowbell; Wadada Leo Smith: trumpet, soprano trumpet, flugelhorn, Indian flute; Michael Gregory Jackson: acoustic guitar, vocal, electric guitar, electric mandolin, bamboo flute, timpani, marimba, percussion. Record Label: ESP Disk

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Review by Michael G. Nastos ALL MUSIC

Michael Gregory Jackson's first recording as a leader has been reissued on CD from the ESP-Disk group, and it's a vivid reminder of how melodically charged his music is from a more subtle perspective. With Jackson primarily on acoustic guitar, the memorable melody lines he stretches to full Zen-like lengths are perfectly clear, yet evoke his individualism with little doubt.

Help from tenor saxophonist David Murray, flutist and saxophonist Oliver Lake, and trumpeter Leo Smith support Jackson's agile and facile musings without use of a bassist or drummer, a bold move considering the standard procedures of most free jazz ensembles. Not that those brazen post-John Coltrane groups ignore beauty; it's just manifested differently on this gorgeous set of spontaneous and composed pieces that have a breadth and depth all their own.

With Jackson as a soloist on "Prelueoionti," his cascading acoustic guitar lines tumble and glisten with the sheen of a waterfall, while the ensemble pieces (like the title track) float in time, the woodwind players giving supple but not demonstrative support. Later in the program, a spiky or angular approach is heard, as you would expect, from Lake and Murray, but a somber mood ("Ballad") or patient improvisation ("IOMI") identifies this music more accurately. Considering Jackson's later amplified work, Clarity is good to hear again, reminding everyone of his starting point, where flowering talent brightly bloomed.

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Michael Gregory Jackson: Fresh Sweet Sound
(Liner notes MGJ Clarity, Circle, Triangle, Square)

A corpulent man on the Lower East Side was telling me what was wrong with new music. One thing he said was very interesting: "The thing that African-American artists have always had is the ability to sing to the people. I know what the subway sounds like at rush hour. I needn't pay for to hear that sort of thing. But a song, something that picks you up and carries you, I would like to hear that." Michael Gregory Jackson's music is like that: it sings and is more often about singing than anything else. But it is about a very interesting struggle against the limitations of a specific style. It draws on the seemingly endless stacks of written music or recordings and the lyric directions, powers and shouts that are the foundations of African-American music, from the field holler to the misty whispers of a Johnny Hodges or a Miles Davis.

It can take you to places as far removed as the breezy folk song or the spectacular mysteries of the so-called avant-garde. All are linked by an affection for melody and contrast often so subtle that one can either listen to the music of the Modern Jazz Quartet or Miles Davis: the paradox of music that is perfect for the background or the foreground, for atmosphere or attentive listening. Oh yes: this music, particularly side one, is perfect for the love-struck person looking out of the traditional rainy day window, the dreamer caught in a passion for the lush solemnity of the natural world or the cynical listener who can't use the merely pretty but has lots of room for the beautiful. Again: melody makes the difference.

Maybe Michael Gregory Jackson's love of melody has to do with the fact that he is a singer who possesses a soft, clear voice that can bend at the edges, or that he is a guitarist whose lines search for a song, being as often pensive as dancing. More probably it has to do with the influences he cites: Ellington, Leo Smith, Eric Dolphy, Hendrix, Wonder, Mahalia Jackson, Son House, Ornette Coleman. The thing that draws all of these musicians together is a consistent concern for melody, color and rhythmic drive as well as subtlety. But what makes a young 23-year-old Mr. Jackson important is his ability to focus all of these influences at such an early age. Too when an artist as young as Mr. Jackson achieves what this recording shows that he already has, we are all much safer as we can observe another person in rebellion against chaos, a creator in search of clarity.

– Stanley Crouch 2/1/77