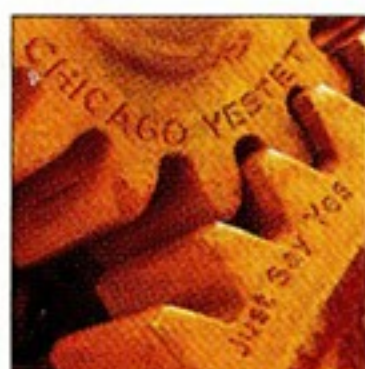


CHICAGO YESTET

JUST SAY YES (Tiddlywinks)



A hard-swinging 11-piece big band, fronted by vocalists delivering lyrics that tackle themes like love, loss and the joys of clubbing along with a few optimistic pleas for tolerance, peace and technological sanity—it could have been an exercise in reactionary “revivalism” or pseudo-nostalgic postmodernist snark, but it’s neither. Trombonist-bandleader-arranger Joel Adams and his Chicago Yestet have rediscovered an oft-forgotten truth: When the ironic sneer has become mainstream, unforced sincerity and directness aren’t only unconventional, they can be downright subversive.

One concession to the zeitgeist, though, is the presence of spoken-word artist Rob Dz, who raps with state-of-the-art dexterity in a smooth baritone. But Adams refuses to play to the cheap seats—he grafts the Beatles’ “The Long and Winding Road” onto a slow-boil funk arrangement, embellishes it with fresh chordal and harmonic shifts, and infuses it with new meaning by featuring vocalist Maggie Burrell’s bathos-free delivery and a rapped interlude from Dz. The topical “In the Here and Now” and “Uncommon Ground,” as well as the disc’s ballads and loves songs, further highlight Burrell’s gift for redeeming sentiments that might otherwise seem clichéd, by virtue of the offhand ease with which she conveys them.

The instrumental soloists are also notable. Trombonist Tom Garling is emotionally and musically supple, his virtuosity and resonant low-end sureness reminiscent of J.J. Johnson; Adams himself fires off contoured, symmetrical phrases infused with humor and toughened by his leathery timbre, bop-like angularity and rhythmic pugnacity; tenor saxophonists Geof Bradfield and Scott Burns and alto saxophonist Dan Nicholson are forceful and unfettered while avoiding self-indulgent pyrotechnics; Ryan Cohan’s piano creates landscapes alternately tranquil and antic, skipping up and down hills and cutting corners with brio, sometimes playfully missing steps and beats along the way but never stumbling.

DAVID WHITEIS