Jeff Steinberg – Jazz Blends
Contributed by Rick Culver
Jeff Steinberg – Jazz Blends
Featuring the Jeff Steinberg Jazz Ensemble
Produced and arranged by Jeff Steinberg
r roduced and arranged by Jen Stelliberg
(www.villagesquare.com)

Now that Starbucks is promoting and selling CD's, they should pick up Jeff Steinberg's "Jazz Blends," not least because of its so appropriate subtitle: "a robust blend of instrumental jazz with your coffee," which fits so well with Starbucks' reason for existing. "Jazz Blends" covers a wide range of styles, Latin, blues, ballads and medium fast tunes, and includes a couple of well known pop tunes.

Although there is no improvisation in the first three tunes, this will not take away from the enjoyment of listening to the well written and played music. Indeed, it merely confirms how great CD this can be when you're just relaxing at the breakfast nook with your morning coffee, noon tea, evening milk, or night tipple; in fact with or without any kind of beverage or pabulum.

If you're relatively new to jazz, "Jazz Blends" is an impressive introduction to different styles of jazz as well as to some very finely tuned arrangements of old standards. The familiar melodies are easy to listen to and to learn, in part because there isn't a lot of improvisation. Thus, beginning students can concentrate completely on the orchestrations of the melodic line. Each tune is arranged as you might a big band, only it's played by a small group, and played very well.

For the first time, tune number three, "Black Coffee," features Jay Patten on sax playing some simple but effective improvisation, in fact, more along the lines of ornamentation than outright improvisation.

Again, for beginning players, by Jeff arranging the order of the tunes this way, it makes it easier to understand and analyze each melody, and to add to ones improvisational knowledge in incremental steps. Only then can you begin to wander off on your own with accomplished

creative improvisation. Since a written-down melody is an improvisation now locked in place after being set on paper and fine tuned, knowing how a melody works can only improve your chances of

a better creative effort. The first actual improvisation occurs when guest artist George Tidwell plays his trumpet solo on "But Not For Me."

Jeff Steinberg, on piano, does not improvise. However, he does offer something a lot of beginning jazz piano students overlook, and that is judicious and discriminating voicings in his melodic solos, which turn out to be as interesting as many other players' improvisations.

A lot of the tunes on "Jazz Blends" are old and some of them originate in corny musicals. Therefore, it's not surprising that the melodies themselves are fairly corny. Yet, along the lines of what Bill Evans did so successfully, Steinberg has taken these dated and somewhat musty old tunes and changed them, reinventing them from a style you thought could never be anything but hokey into something quite refreshing.

A good example would be "A Taste of Honey." Jeff's arrangement begins as a jazz waltz, then switches to four-four, then back and forth between three-four and the four-four. There is some improvisation on this tune.

Denis Solee, on baritone sax, has the opening statement on "You're the Cream In My Coffee," another old tune, updated into a most refreshing and enjoyable arrangement. I'll certainly add this tune to my own jazz trio book after listening to this arrangement. Just more proof that, no matter how unfortunate the history of a melody, if put into the hands of an inventive arranger, the more sophisticated listener will always appreciate its new appearance.

Part of that appreciation on the above tune can be found in Denis Solee's exquisite time, which he delivers in an easy and relaxed manner with a very pure and controlled sound. Many baritone saxophonists have a somewhat honky and reedy sound, that can grate a little on one's ear during a bout of listening. Denis's is more along the lines of Gerry

Mulligan, which automatically qualifies it for high honors in the easy-to- listen-to department.

Burt Bacharach's "I'll Never Fall In Love Again," is another example of how a now rather well-worn tune can be turned into an acceptable listening experience.

Another accolade to add to this recording is the mix. When I can listen to this CD over my car speakers during high-speed road noise, and it still sounds great, imagine the pleasure you'll get listening to this same CD in a controlled environment with the reproductive possibilities of audiophile equipment.

Now, I must admit that if you're trying to push the envelope as a listener or player, this is probably not the CD for you. Neither Joshua Redman nor Anthony Braxton will be found here. Regardless, this CD features arrangements and playing that will sustain not just the beginner, but anyone who likes listening to good jazz. If you can become engaged enough for an enjoyable and easy-learning experience, this CD can be an introduction for some and a pleasure to all. For whatever reason, it has a definite place in your CD repertoire.