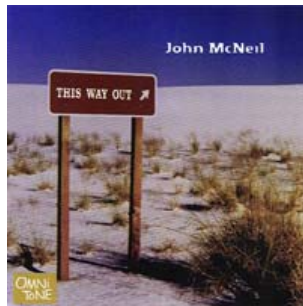


JOHN MCNEIL This Way Out OmniTone Records

John McNeil, a trumpet stylist with an edgy, modern approach to the horn, has met with some resistance from the arbiters of jazz fashion. It is fashionable to favor improvisers who adhere to certain prescribed ways of composing a tune, playing a line or constructing a solo. Meanwhile, jazz originals like McNeil follow their own muse.



For his debut on OmniTone, McNeil chose to work with two relatively unknown Spanish musicians, tenor saxophonist Gorke Benitez and bassist Giulia Valle. In conjunction with a series of quartet dates arranged by drummer Joe Smith, they recorded in Barcelona in June 2002. The result is a vibrant, adventurous and totally captivating glimpse into McNeil's creative mind.

Infectious Spanish rhythms leap out of nearly every track, especially the opener "Mi Tio (My Uncle)" and the gentle tango-influenced "A la Orilla." African polyrhythm is the inspiration for "My Taxi," while "Last Minute" is a bebop puzzler with an insistent, walking bass line. The repetitive 5/4 meter of "Know Your Limits," stated explicitly by Valle on bass, creates an hypnotic feel. McNeil himself describes the brief "West Coast Memories" as "Chet (Baker) and Gerry (Mulligan) on acid."

"What Comes After," however, may be the best of the bunch, with its spooky, funereal tone. Valle bows the bass in harmony with Benitez on sax, and then McNeil enters with the somber, but beautiful melody. Smith tastefully accompanies the piece on cymbals and occasional tom-tom punctuations. A masterpiece.

Benitez, in his explorative, keening sound, is a perfect foil for McNeil's odd meters, understated melodies and skillful use of silence, while Valle and Smith hold it all together with impeccable taste and timing. The saxophonist also contributed three tunes, the disjointed, impressionistic "Picasso View," the lovely "Because of You," and "Flor de Viento."