

Basie-watchers are a strange and heterogeneous breed. As a member of this world-wide society, with credentials so extensive that they go back to the Reno Club in Kansas City, I can attest to the diversity of their interests and the durability of their enthusiasm.

Nowadays there are those who prefer their shot of Basie with some kind of mix. Perhaps it will be a vocal group such as the Mills Brothers, as in *The Board of Directors* (DLP 25838) or *Annual Report* (DLP 23888). On other occasions and other labels it could be a solo vocalist, a rock singer, a set of Disney tunes or current pop hits.

This time, as the album title makes unmistakably clear, there is no mix. This is Basie on the rocks.

It is logical to expect from this unique orchestral monolith a reasonable percentage of compositions and arrangements designed specifically to place on display the essence of the Basie style. True, the Count and his arrangers have shown a facility for adapting source material from a variety of media. Nevertheless, when the music is *Basie-Straight Ahead*, you know that this is what it was all about, from the very beginnings at the Reno Club on through the roller coaster years that saw the decline of big bands, the temporary absence and exciting resurgence of the great Basie swingmobile.

The music on these sides also serves to introduce a composer-arranger who is new to the band. Though it has been barely a year since Sammy Nestico started writing for Basie, he came to the job with a solid background of musical experience in several musical areas.

"We first heard about Sammy through Grover Mitchell," says Basie. "They're old buddies from Pittsburgh, where they both played trombone during the 1940's. A year or so ago Grover asked Sammy to send in some things to us, and we've built up a good stock of his things.

"He's such a melodic writer, and everything he does fits the band so well; it's a joy to have someone like him working for us."

The truth of Basie's evolution became evident as the session progressed. Everything moved so smoothly that some numbers were completed on the first full take.

During a coffee-break I asked Nestico for fuller information about his background. (First let it be clarified that he is not related to Sal Nestico, the saxophonist who played with Basie in 1965.) Sammy, it turned out, is a 20-year service man. He put in three years during World War II, then spent several years on staff at the ABC studios in Pittsburgh before resuming the military life. He switched from the Air Force to the Marines, retir-

ing in March 1968 as chief arranger for the U.S. Marine Band in Washington D.C.

This might seem to be an improbable background for a Basie writer; however, on digging a little further back into his credits you find that he also played in many name bands during the swing era: Tommy Dorsey, Gene Krupa, Charlie Barnet, et al.

Of the nine Nestico originals that make up the album, none is more characteristic than "Basie-Straight Ahead," the title song and opening track. The Count sets the easy-going pace from the keyboard, saxophones introduce the theme, and the roaring brass team swings the release. Eric Dixon, the muscular tenor soloist who has been part of the Basie sound since 1962, tells his story in bold strokes of the brush.

"It's Oh, So Nice" is another unpretentiously charming melody built mainly in four-note phrases. Again the reed section affirms its potent identity, with anchor man Charlie Fowlkes pulling his considerable weight on baritone. Grover Mitchell's trombone solo displays a tone quality not unlike that of Duke's Lawrence Brown.

"Lonely Street," introduced by trumpets in Harmon mutes, provides a setting for the alto saxophone of Marshall Royal. Even in the ensembles, Royal has such a distinctive sound that

many listeners, in a blindfold test, can recognize the band simply by spotting his presence. But "Lonely Street" displays Marshall's sinuous lines as a soloist in the Benny Carter-Johnny Hodges tradition. This is a superb example of the Basie band in its prettiest ballad mood.

"Fun Time" moves along at that happy loping pace so natural to the band. What, you may ask, makes Sammy swing? The answer: his uncluttered, rhythm-conscious scoring, and the unmatched ability of the orchestra to bring his charts to life. Eric Dixon is the flute soloist here.

"The Magic Flea" was the flag waver for this date. The tenor sax sound, one of the most readily identifiable in jazz, is that of Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis. Note the dynamic contribution of Harold Jones. As Basie remarked when we listened to the playback, "A great drummer can mean everything to a band. Harold has really pulled us together." This track ends with a cute two-piccolo coda, courtesy of Bobby Plater and Eric Dixon.

"Switch in Time," a minor blues with attractive chord changes, features Al Aarons on trumpet, Dixon on tenor, Basie, and a brilliant finale galvanized by Harold Jones.

"Hay Burner" (anyone who knows Basie's love for horses will understand the reason for this title) starts out with a relaxed two-beat feeling that

suggests the old Jimmie Lunceford orchestra, but soon moves into a more typical four-beat Basie pulse. A shouting ensemble toward the end offers a soaring reminder of the band's tightly-meshed team spirit.

"That Warm Feeling," a beguiling melody in the tradition of Neal Hefti's "Li'l Darlin'" may surprise you. Basie over-dubbing piano and organ parts? Guess again. It's the Count at the console, but his place at the piano was taken over, with just the right touch of Basie simplicity, by Sammy Nestico.

"The Queen Bee," another unhurried sampling of ne plus ultra big band jazz, has Eric Dixon and Bill Basie in the spotlight, but don't for a moment overlook that rhythm section wrapped around the Count. Freddie Green's guitar and Norman Keenan's bass blend with Jones and Basie to form an impeccably unified underpinning.

As the musicians prepared to leave the studio, compliments flew around like eighth notes. Producers Tom Mack and Teddy Reig, Basie, Nestico and the sidemen were all enthusing. Grover Mitchell summed it up most succinctly with his observation: "Best damn album we've made in five years!"

You don't have to be from Pittsburgh to agree with him.

—Leonard Feather

(Author of *The Encyclopedia of Jazz in the Sixties*)

[Original liner notes from *Straight Ahead*, DLP-25902]

Personnel:

Count Basie—piano

Al Aarons, Oscar Brashear, Gene Coe,

George Cohn—trumpets

Dick Boone, Steve Galloway, Bill Hughes, Grover Mitchell—

trombone Bobby Plater—alto saxophone, flute

Marshall Royal—alto saxophone

Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis—tenor saxophone

Eric Dixon—tenor saxophone, flute

Charles Fowlkes—baritone saxophone

Freddie Green—guitar

Norman Keenan—bass Harold Jones—drums

Recorded October 1968, at TTG Studios, Hollywood, CA
Engineered by Ami Hadani and Thorne Nogar

Mastering engineer: Shigeo Miyamoto
under supervision of Tamaki Beck for JVC Studios. 29

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This recording is taken from the original 1960's analog source materials. Due to tape wear, you may experience technical flaws. They are minor, but deserve mention.

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1. BASIE—STRAIGHT AHEAD 3:56
2. IT'S OH, SO NICE 4:10
3. LONELY STREET 2:53
4. FUN TIME 3:52
5. MAGIC FLEA 3:09
6. SWITCH IN TIME 3:58
7. HAY BURNER 4:16
8. THAT WARM FEELING 3:33
9. THE QUEEN BEE 4:13

Composed, arranged and conducted by Sammy Nestico
Originally produced by Tom Mack & Teddy Reig