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MADS TOLLING

CD Review: "The Playmaker"

No doubt some jazz fans unfamiliar with violinist Mads Tolling's background -- he is best known for his stints with the Turtle Island Quartet and a recent edition of bassist-fusion pioneer Stanley Clarke's band -- will be put off by a few tune choices on his new CD, "The Playmaker." But probably not for long. With his honed technique, vigorous attack and engaging brand of swing, Tolling makes a convincing case that songs associated with Radiohead ("Just") and Led Zeppelin ("Black Dog") can colorfully bookend a collection of pieces composed by Thelonious Monk, drawn from Danish folk song traditions or inspired by the likes of James Brown, John McLaughlin and Jaco Pastorius. And let's not forget the Tolling-penned "Playmaker" tributes to ball players Tom Brady, Zinedine Zidane and LeBron James.

Of course, Tolling, a native of Denmark, doesn't pull off this trick without help from an impressive supporting cast. In the album's liner notes, he explains that "in sports, the playmaker's role is to facilitate his teammates, and in music it's kind of the same thing." The lineup includes bassist Clarke, vibraphonist Stefon Harris and keyboardist Russell Ferrante and Tolling consistently benefits from their input. Yet while there's sufficient firepower to fuel the rock covers, the album's highlights often find Tolling and company nimbly exploring swing, ballads and blues.

-- Mike Joyce, Weekend (Jan. 2010)

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