

Ron Thomas: Duo

By **VICTOR L. SCHERMER**

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The poet John Keats famously wrote: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." That's the kind of album this is. It's one stretch of beautiful playing from beginning to end. It's not a "statement," it's not a "thing," it's not a "groove." It's just music that, taken as a whole becomes an "objet d'art," something special to have in your collection and listen to over and over again because its perfection draws you towards it.

Pianist Ron Thomas is known for his excursions into experimentation and complexity. A decade ago, this reviewer interviewed him before his gig at the Rosetree Inn in Delaware County, PA. Thomas talked about the influence of modern classical composers Karlheinz Stockhausen and Elliot Carter, both of whom were mentors, and his recordings, while not "free jazz" as such, pressed the limits of musical expression, even had a "wild" unbridled quality. After the interview, we went downstairs, and I sat at the bar while he did his solo gig of American Songbook standards. It was as if another person than the one I just interviewed were at the piano, somewhat as if Bill Evans or Keith Jarrett was playing softly so the customers could enjoy their dinner. I thought he was playing that way so he could pay the rent. This album -and one that preceded it, *Blues for Zarathustra* (Art of Life Records, 2008) -tells us quite the contrary, that Thomas has another side to him: a reflective, introspective temperament that is immersed in the French impressionism that influenced mid-twentieth century popular music, swing, bebop, and hard bop. This album makes very intelligent use of that genre. With his cohort, bassist [Paul Klinefelter](#),

he is able to weave a fabric of rich, expressive phrasing that is as touching as it is seriously disciplined.

Klinefelter and Thomas have worked together for many years and have become a perfect match. It's not too much of a stretch to say that not since [Bill Evans](#) and [Scott LaFaro](#) have a pianist and bassist played in such intimate coordination. Thomas' style here owes a lot to Evans, although his voicings are more advanced thanks to a half century passage of time as well as Thomas' individuality and musical knowledge. Klinefelter is totally in communication with Thomas, filling in the lower registers with his own introspection. Whether it's a Brazilian (Luiz Bonfá) standard like "Black Orpheus" or Jobim's "Once I Loved," or a sentimental tune like "Young and Foolish," or a song of grief like "Here's that Rainy Day," their approach is consistent throughout.

Most often, musicians take a tune and say, "What can we do with this?" They'll either give it one of several common treatments or try it in a completely novel way. By contrast, Thomas and Klinefelter render all the songs with the same lieder-like essence. It's an idea that goes back to the philosopher Plato. They are not interested in the shadows on the wall of the cave, but the ideal forms in the light outside the cave. They give each song the same pure expressiveness rather than manipulating it for effect. That's very difficult to accomplish, but they succeed. It risks boredom and repetition, but in this album it becomes a steady cool stream of what's already there with infusions of imaginative phrasings and variations. In this way, each song, like Keats' Grecian urn, becomes a work of art that reminds us that "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty,—That is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know."

Track Listing: Black Orpheus; Young and Foolish; Stella By Starlight;

Here's that Rainy Day; My Foolish Heart; Once I Loved; F Minor;
Invitation.

Personnel: Ron Thomas, piano; Paul Klinefelter, bass.

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