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ive your radio dial a gentle spin and see where it leads. Chances are it lands on some style of popular music, and if you're lucky, an artist or band whose muse goes beyond the manicured riffs, melodic hooks or sub-bass ear candy jammed into today's airways. While the pull of popularity has always been enticing, some composers follow a higher calling by using their ingenuity and passion to create timeless music that's eventually enshrined into our collective cultural

consciousness.

From the 1920's to 1940's Jazz claimed this unique domain, adding reams of pages into the American songbook while establishing remarkable milestones that inspired how popular music was experienced throughout the world. As this prolific period faded, popular groups like Tower of Power, Earth Wind and Fire, the Beatles and Joni Mitchell flirted with Jazz by incorporating advanced harmonics, sophisticated rhythms and open frameworks into their musical lexicons. And Jazz flirted back with inventive arrangements of classic pop tunes that exquisitely balanced their familiarity against imaginative interpretations common within improvisational music. Radio dials spun wild and we all reaped the rewards.

But rewards like these come with a certain degree of risk. For those seeking to hybridizing pop with Jazz (or Jazz with pop), there's always the risk of alienating audiences who prefer to isolate these genres. Enter Joe Syrian, veteran drummer and leader of the Motor City Octet. An emissary of superb taste with a trained ear for shaping enticing musical narratives, Syrian understands how to balance the accessible nature of pop with the adventurous musical mindset of his ensemble. When asked to describe this process, Syrian astutely recognizes that "popular music resonates with people and works for many audiences. We just take that and mold it to our unique framework."

With significant nods to the pliability of the album's songs, the rigor applied to the ensemble's arrangements, and the caliber of musicianship within his seasoned octet, Syrian's *Secret Message* is a joyful treatise on the enduring quality of elite popular music. Exploring compositions he's cultivated for years, Syrian leverages several guest arrangers, along with the idiosyncratic talent of his band, to mine new energy from popular music that continues to capture the public imagination.

Composed in 1926 by Ray Henderson, *Bye, Bye Blackbird* has found its way onto the set lists of everyone from Miles Davis to Peggy Lee and Joe Cocker. Syrian guides the tune through a medium swing, with the band subtly stating the melody during a series of solos by pianist Adam Birnbaum, guitarist Paul Bollenback, saxophonist Tim Ries and trumpeter Nick Marchionne. *Star Eyes* receives its up tempo energy from a delightfully caffeinated arrangement by trombonist John Fedchock. Oscillating between a "Birdland like" meter and swing, the band adds a lively touch to a tune that traditionally comes across as somber or wistful.

Even more relevant today than when it was first written in 1971, *People Make the World Go Round* finds a renewed sense of purpose via a superb arrangement by trombonist Doug Beavers. Blurring distinctions that often segregate musical genres, pop, blues, Jazz and R&B coexist harmoniously, all accented by the deft work of guest artists vocalist Kenny Washington, vibe master Joe Locke and the percussive work of Luisito Quintero.

"Good music is open to flexibility," notes Syrian, and that's clearly the case with the Beatles classic *Here, There and Everywhere*. Arranged by pianist Adam Birnbaum, the tune's metronome fades to a Baroque inspired background creating space for a spirited conversation between Beavers and Ries followed by the quiet elegance of Birnbaum's solo before the song softly glides to a close. Stevie Wonder's *Don't You Worry 'Bout A Thing* takes on a Latin flare as the band maneuvers between horn choruses that map out the vivacious, buoyant nature of the tune. Leon Russell's *This Masquerade* gets its gait from the saucy lilt of an arrangement by David Caffey. Forever bluesy, the band sways through the composition with baritone saxophonist Carl

Maraghi, Ries, and Birnbaum having their say before guitarist Bollenback's mercurial solo brings the song home.

Cole Porter's *Night and Day* is reborn as a rumba sauntering through established chord changes and horn harmonies that map the alluring nature of the composition. Arranged by Duke Ellington aficionado David Berger, the song features individual voicings for the soloists at hand - something Ellison was prolifically famous for. Acting as the album's punctuation point is Billy Strayhorn's *I Should Care*, ending an album full of invention with a song where only minor tweaks are required to allow the tune to shine on it's own. Here sounding more like a big band, the group swings hard while showcasing the nimble nature of an octet that Syrian has fashioned to elevate the humble nature of his musical identity.

Familiarity breeds a certain sense of comfort, a treasured feeling of belonging to a time or place. Joe Syrian manages this sentiment by uplifting time-honored music with a modern flare that speaks to a standard of innovation that's essential within Jazz. His mission, and perhaps ours too, is to dive deeper into what makes popular music sophisticated, revelatory and often sublime, while adding the right compliment of arranging and musicianship to highlight the unique nature of these special compositions. Equal parts arts historian and ethnomusicologist, *Secret Messages* guides you through a deeper understanding of what makes these songs so enduring, inviting and particularly conducive to experimentation.

Secret Messages' edict is simple: in a phrenetic world, create time and space to explore music that continues to mesmerize audiences while compelling musicians to unpack the nature of its soul and sophistication. Maybe this message isn't so secret after all. Good music lives on. Great compositions often land in the hands of artists driven to reimagine their brilliance into new musical adventures for the next generation to carry forward. Secret Message fully owns this philosophy with a superb collection of immortal tunes revered in ways that extend the legacies of their creators while celebrating the continued vibrance of where Jazz and pop music intersect.