



Pure Pleasure SES-19734

Cecil Payne: Zodiac

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Manufacturer: Pure Pleasure Original label: Strata-East Genre: Jazz

It's impossible to talk about this album without acknowledging the spectre of death that hangs over it - not only is it the third entry in Strata-East Records' Dolphy Series, a collection of archival recordings from some of the label's close associates honoring the recently deceased multi-instrumentalist, but it is actually dedicated to two members of the band, Wynton Kelly and Kenny Dorham, who died in between the recording sessions and its release. The point is driven home even further by the fact that the album begins with a tribute from Payne to the fallen Martin Luther King, Jr., a piece that acts as a de facto solo for Dorham - his playing all rosy elegance and regal warmth - before shifting into the lighter (though equally coolly-paced) "I Know Love", a showcase for Payne's sax. While not the most somber jazz track ever recorded, this opening suite is a low-key and mournful way to open the affair, but thankfully the album really picks off and shows these musicians more in their element the rest of the way. "Girl, You Got a Home" is a funky piece, beginning very soulfully with some tight interplay among the rhythm section of Kelly, bassist Wilbur Ware and drummer Albert Heath. Ware is in especially fine form on this track, tying together the disparate passages of the piece by grounding the more ponderous moments in a deep funk, while Kelly's playing is especially ear catching in the way he stabs at his piano like it's an organ. After the first two tracks take up nearly twenty minutes, the four-minute "Slide Hampton" feels almost impossibly brief, a feeling that's enhanced by its quick, jittery, and infectious rhythm, driven by some really dexterous work from Kelly. The final track, "Flying Fish", may be the album's highlight, a Caribbean-inspired composition that casts the rhythm section as flighty ground for both Payne and Dorham to vamp on. The track is oddly danceable for something released on Strata-East,

maybe the most fun moment ever for the label, and relentlessly uptempo. Though this release may be in part defined by the deaths that preceded it, it's clear that the recording process was actually a lot of fun for everybody, as their enthusiasm and energy jumps right out of the speakers. This is one of the first Strata East records I really got into and is still one of my favorites, a must-hear for any fans of the flightier moments of Dorham or Kelly's career, and a fitting tribute for both master musicians.

"Zodiac" - Kenny Dorham (tp); Cecil Payne (bs, as); Wynton Kelly (p); Wilbur Ware (b); Albert Kuumba Heath (dr)