

DECADE – LINER NOTES

The title that Clifton Anderson has chosen for his second CD signifies the span of time that separates it from his first. In the interim, Anderson has not been reinventing himself, or cooking up some clever new concept that might generate an ephemeral marketing buzz. On the contrary, like any great musician with a strong foundation and a clear conception, he has been working at getting better; trusting that, through application, his technique and his imagination will carry him forward. The music at hand shows the value of staying the course when you are on the right path.

It has not hurt that this course has been pursued in the company of Sonny Rollins, in whose band Anderson has served as second melodic voice for nearly a quarter-century. Not that standing shoulder to shoulder for so long with the consensus world's-greatest-living-improviser would not test the ego of even the most selfless soul; but Anderson has long understood that the experience was worth the slings and arrows of critics and fans who would rather hear all Sonny, all the time. To judge from the responses observed at Rollins concerts in recent years, he is even winning over these diehards, and for good reason. This is a trombonist who blends brilliantly with his boss, who always provides a valuable perspective on the music at hand.

Decade confirms that Anderson also has plenty to say on his own—that he has developed the strength, personality, and leadership qualities required to stand apart from his legendary boss. This has never been more clear than on the present recording, where Anderson draws upon his impeccable instrumental command (which received an important boost through work with fellow trombonists Robin Eubanks, Steve Turre, and especially Slide Hampton), an imposing range of other experience (including work with McCoy Tyner, Muhal Richard Abrams, Lester Bowie's Brass Fantasy, Geri Allen, and Wallace Roney), a compositional gift heard on six of the present tracks, and a sure sense of how to build a supporting ensemble. In the process, Anderson has created a program that provides the most complete and exciting gauge of his talents to date.

Six of the tracks are built around the imposing rhythm section of pianist Larry Willis, bassist Bob Cranshaw, and drummer Al Foster. There are a couple of natural affinities within this group: the Rollins band, where Cranshaw has been ensconced nearly twice as long as Anderson, and where Foster worked extensively in the '70s and occasionally since; and New York's High School of Music and Art, the alma mater of Anderson and Willis. Cranshaw was the bassist when Willis made his recording debut (on Jackie McLean's *Right Now!*), and Foster was the drummer on both Willis's first and most recent sessions as a leader. This is a foursome with much shared history, and it can be heard in the music they make together.

“Noble,” which back in the bebop era might have been titled “Nobility,” is Anderson’s tribute to Gil Noble, the host and producer of WABC-TV’s *Like It Is* for the past four decades, and the emcee at Sonny Rollins’s recent and triumphant Carnegie Hall concert. The melody conveys the strength and seriousness of its subject, and the strong chord changes inspire solos in kind from Anderson (who begins strolling on bass and drums) and Willis. An equally impressive theme carries “So Wrong About You,” which is performed as a walking ballad. Both Anderson’s writing and playing balance melancholy and resolve, with the latter emotion winning out (especially in the second trombone solo) and Willis with him in support all the way. Note the ease with which Anderson moves between long, virtuosic lines and more emphatic vocalizations in his solo. After the piano chorus, Cranshaw steps forward to remind us that he remains a master of the upright as well as the electric bass.

Two standards find this quartet in other moods. “I’m Old Fashioned” is a hard swinger that swings harder as Anderson’s solo progresses. His muted sound here is worth noting, as is his free-flowing opening with only Foster in support. The drummer is also heard at the top of “I’m Glad There Is You,” but alone this time, using mallets to set up a theme chorus where the focus is on the melody and Anderson’s glorious sound. This track is a lesson in pacing, with emotions building through the trombone and piano solos to a heartfelt coda.

Eric Wyatt, who has been heard in New York of late leading the jam sessions at Sweet Rhythm, joins the same personnel on two Anderson originals. Wyatt is Rollins’s godson (his dad, Charles Wyatt, was an alto player and one of Rollins’s boyhood friends), and he has clearly attended to his godfather in matters of phrase-building and rhythmic articulation while still developing his own sound. Fittingly, the two Anderson originals that feature Wyatt’s horn are closest to the feeling of the working Rollins band. “Deja-Blu” is a blues with a strong medium-tempo groove, nicely harmonized and employing the opening phrase to launch tenor and trombone solos after Willis takes the first spot. “Aah Soon Come,” a calypso line, includes Cranshaw’s sole appearance on electric bass and adds percussionist Kimati Dinizulu from the Rollins band on percussion. In addition to the dance-inducing solos, the track reminds us how expert Foster is in the area of Caribbean rhythms.

Three additional tracks feature a younger though equally fitting rhythm section. It includes two more associates from the current Rollins band, drummer Steve Jordan (another Music and Art alum) and pianist Stephen Scott, plus bass stalwart Christian McBride. Together with Anderson, they drain the pop hit “If” of its sentimentality through a straight-ahead rhythmic approach that finds each player entering behind the trombone in sequence. A surprisingly dark

vamp also adds dramatic ambiguity at the close. Jordan, best known for his pop music successes, is extremely responsive behind the trombone solo.

Kenny Garrett, who did a feature turn on Anderson's previous album, adds his alto sax to two originals that mix moods creatively. The first, "Z," sets up attractive tension through its mix of straight-ahead and suspended time, inspiring solos both athletic and affirmative, including a McBride statement after the theme is reprised. "Stubbs," for the late saxophonist John Stubblefield, covers an even broader emotional range, from Scott's requiem-type opening to the modal blues theme and, ultimately, a collage fade. Everyone is breathing fire here, especially Anderson in the second trombone solo and the always-incendiary saxophonist.

Anderson and Scott have "We'll Be Together Again" to themselves, a flowing meditation that one hopes can be taken as a commitment on the trombonist's part. A decade is an awfully long time to wait for a follow-up album, but Doxy Records should help ensure that Clifton Anderson need not wait so long to display the talent so brilliantly spotlighted here.

Bob Blumenthal