

JAN KNUTSON

Looking Both Ways

By Ken Avis

Let's get past the fact that Jan Knutson released his second CD, *Looking Both Ways*, before finishing high school. It's a wow-inducing nugget to contemplate but the issue comes down to whether the CD is worth a listen. If you enjoy guitarists like Joe Pass, Herb Ellis and chord-melody style guitar, you're going to enjoy *Looking Both Ways*.

Having been raised on Ella Fitzgerald and Joe Pass albums like *Take Love Easy*, and Pass's solo *Virtuoso* albums, I think Knutson's 2014 debut album of solo guitar, *Out of Nowhere*, was a delight. His impressive collaborators include guitarist Paul Wingo, who is listed as a friend and teacher, and jazz guitar legend Frank Vignola, who produced the CD. Vignola has invited Knutson to perform live with him a number of times—an impressive endorsement in itself.

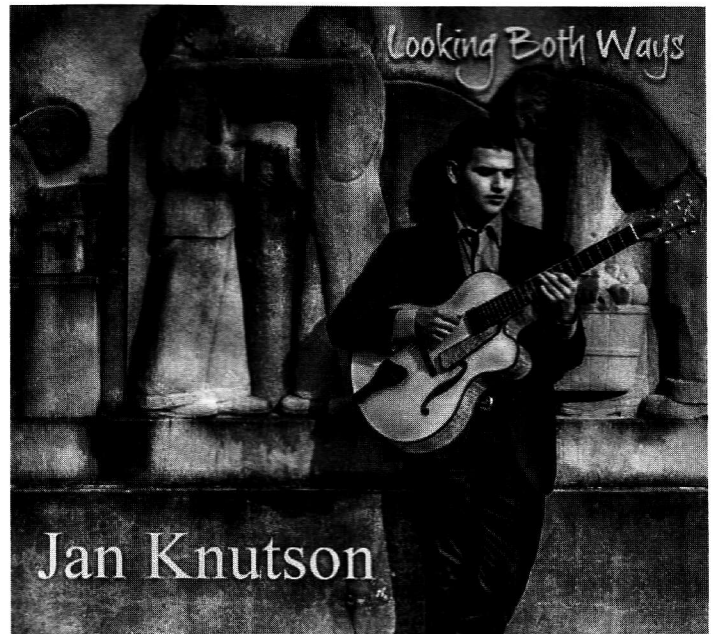
Looking Both Ways takes the story further, documenting Knutson's development with another friend and teacher, the great Steve Abshire. To watch Abshire and Knutson play together, as they did at Knutson's Strathmore Artist-in-Residence show earlier this year, is a study of camaraderie as they clearly share mutual joy and respect as well as they exchange solo lines.

Live and on this CD, Knutson is in the company of the best musicians around. On tracks like "Pennies from Heaven," the twin, weaving guitars of Knutson and Abshire carry the tune in the style of Pass and Ellis. Elsewhere, mandolin ace Danny Knicely cuts loose, swinging his way through "Honeysuckle Rose" and "Avalon." The inspired hands of Tommy Cecil on Duke Ellington's "Cotton Tail" show why he is rightly recognized as one of the best bass players today. These seasoned musicians provide a sympathetic and tasteful support to the music, never overpowering the guitar.

Knutson doesn't overwork the band. A good half of the cuts are solo jazz guitar arrangements, full of surprises, melody and swing. What I love about this album is the variety; its inventive, sensitive arrangements feature delicious melodic lines and stylish guitar playing throughout.

Amidst the classics are a handful of Jan Knutson originals. "Blink" and "Paul's Place," a composition inspired by and dedicated to Wingo, fit perfectly alongside the standards. "Amsterdam" offers a more introspective, ambient sound—a modern sounding, solo guitar composition, yet with references to the greats of jazz guitar. A lovely piece.

In addition to Knutson's good fortune in attracting such excellent musicians and mentors, his family must also be credited for supporting his talents. At the previously mentioned Strathmore show I sat by a couple who were smiling so broadly they had to be Knutson's parents . . . and indeed



CD REVIEW

they were. His CD liner notes mention that he picked up guitar at the age of 10 and started "taking jazz seriously" when he was around 12. Knutson's father—a US Navy Band trombonist—developed his skills as a luthier and builds the guitars that his son plays.

So, with two first-rate CDs to his name, Jan Knutson is now looking both ways, preparing to move to the Manhattan School of Music to further his studies. He is looking to the future while also looking back on experiences and people that have inspired his playing. I'm at a bit of a loss to imagine how much better he can get with four years of formal training . . . but I'm willing to stick around, and I'm expecting to be surprised and impressed.



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