

The Laszlo Gardony Sextet with Stan Strickland, Billy Pierce, Don Braden, John Lockwood and Yoron Israel

New CD: Life In Real Time (Sunnyside Records)

The 10 Best Jazz Albums of 2015 – The Boston Globe
“Four Stars” – Down Beat

“Laszlo Gardony adds a vivacious live performance to his impressive discography with Life In Real Time, recorded at the Berklee Performance Center in Boston with Berklee stalwarts John Lockwood on bass and Yoron Israel on drums. The album mixes inventive originals with fresh, exciting takes on standards, maintaining a thread of inspired improvisation and calibrated group interplay throughout.”

– DownBeat, Editors’ Picks July 2015

“...these eight tracks contain more than enough musical riches to keep the ears happy and keep the toes tapping.”

– Dan Bilawsky, All About Jazz



Sunnyside

Over the past quarter century pianist/composer **Laszlo Gardony** has gained widespread acclaim for a series of inspired albums documenting his trio and his riveting solo recitals. In a welcome addition to his treasure-laden discography, he delivered his first sextet session, ***Life In Real Time***, a thrilling live album recorded at the Berklee Performance Center at Boston’s Berklee College of Music (where most of the ensemble is on faculty).

Rather than an all-star blowing session, *Life In Real Time* introduces an ensemble that breathes, phrases and reacts as one, reveling in the knife-point balance between structure and freedom afforded by Gardony’s arrangements and bandleading sensibility. Indeed, part of what makes the

album so much more than the sum of its considerable parts is the rhythm section's extraordinary rapport. Gardony's long-running trio with bass master **John Lockwood** and drum maestro **Yoron Israel** has forged a soul-deep bandstand communion over the past 13 years, an almost telepathic bond captured on three critically acclaimed Sunnyside albums. The trio is directly responsible for the loose and limber feel of *Life In Real Time*, where three immediately recognizable saxophone stars "can feel free to be themselves in the music," Gardony says.

And what horn players! Most conspicuously, the album marks the reemergence of the great **Billy Pierce**, a player who established himself as a commanding improviser during his years with drum legends Tony Williams and Art Blakey (who called Pierce "my best tenor player since Wayne Shorter.") He sounds more formidable than ever with his thick, muscular sound and driving rhythmic attack.

While **Stan Strickland** is best known as a startlingly inventive post-bop tenor saxophonist, he's a polymathic creative force who also works as a singer, actor and art therapist. Gardony's longtime friend and Berklee colleague, Strickland contributed memorably to the pianist's 2011 Sunnyside album *Signature Time* with Lockwood and Israel. It was Israel who suggested adding **Don Braden** to the mix. The album's only Berklee ringer (he's the director of the Harvard Monday Night Jazz Band), Braden was in Wynton Marsalis' band, has performed with Freddie Hubbard and Tony Williams, and is featured on some 20 albums as a leader.

"I hand-picked the musicians for this band," Gardony explains. "Don was a great addition to the band, and it clicked so beautifully from the first. All of the bandmembers have had long careers and we're committed to playing together as a beautiful and meaningful experience."

Focusing on Gardony's emotionally charged original compositions, the album opens with his rollicking "Bourbon Street Boogie," which evokes the raucous, celebratory energy of New Orleans. Pierce takes the first solo, a rhythmic tour de force that makes a compelling case for him as one of jazz's most under-documented masters. Israel introduces the relentlessly driving "Breakout" with a beautifully calibrated solo passage. The piece builds momentum through a series of tag-team solos until its ecstatically cathartic climax.

Gardony puts on his arranger's hat for a joyously funky version George Shearing's standard "Lullaby of Birdland." Braden takes a stutter-stepping solo that turns the melody inside out, and then Gardony gives a masterclass in groove, maintaining a rumbling ostinato throughout his solo with an undulating left-hand line doubled by Lockwood's bass. Another highlight is the haunting version of the spiritual "Motherless Child," a song he's explored often as a member of violinist Matt Glaser's celebrated jazz-meets-bluegrass band The Wayfaring Strangers. "After playing it with Matt many times I started to hear something, a reharmonization that's partially inspired by the way that Richie Havens sang it at Woodstock," Gardony says. "I thought it would be perfect for Stan's bass clarinet. You can tell what song it is, but I wrote this long form and the melody crystallizes at the end."

Strickland's bass clarinet is featured again on Gardony's West African-derived ballad "New Song," a tune introduced as a trio piece on the album *Dig Deep*. With its meditative, cyclical feel, the ravishing melody calls out for lyrics. The album closes with "Out On Top," another piece from *Dig Deep* that gains momentum as it hurtles toward a deliriously celebratory all-horns-on-deck conclusion. This was one set that clearly left the audience wanting more (in fact, there's a bonus track from the concert available on iTunes).

Born in Hungary, **Laszlo Gardony** displayed an early aptitude for the piano. By five he had started improvising, devising little tunes inspired by the blues, pop and classical music he heard around the house. Immersed in the European classical tradition while growing up, he was drawn to progressive rock as a teenager, and spent countless hours improvising blues-based music at the piano. He investigated gospel and studied jazz, a passion that soon overshadowed his classical pursuits. "We had jazz and African music classes at the Conservatory," Gardony recalls. "There were some very knowledgeable people and a lot of records. When it came to jazz it was a tiny community, but very inspiring."

After graduating from the Bela Bartok Conservatory and the Science University of Budapest, he became one of Europe's most sought after accompanists and released his first albums as a leader. Possessing a powerful sense of swing, a strong feel for the blues and a firm command of post-bop vocabulary, he gained invaluable

insight by sharing festival stages with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers and Abdullah Ibrahim, among others.

A full scholarship to Berklee brought him to America in 1983, and a faculty position at the school upon graduation kept him stateside. He made his US recording debut with the acclaimed 1988 album *The Secret* (Antilles) featuring Czech bass great Miroslav Vitous and drummer Ian Froman, but it was his 1st place win the following year at the Great American Jazz Piano Competition that catapulted him into the national spotlight. He seized the moment with 1989's brilliant release *The Legend of Tsumi* (Antilles), a trio session with bassist Dave Holland and drummer Bob Moses. "Being with Dave and Miroslav was such an education," Gardony says. "If you really immerse yourself in those moments, it can change you, whether it's one concert or a week-long gig."

In many circles Gardony is best known as a master of the trio format. He introduced his present band with Israel and Lockwood on the 2003 Sunnyside album *Ever Before Ever After*, and it's gained recognition as one of the finest working bands in jazz. But he's equally impressive alone at the piano, the format he first explored on 1993's acclaimed *Changed Standards* and returned to again on his last album, 2013's *Clarity* (both on Sunnyside). After the probing introspection of a solo recital it seems fitting that Gardony returns with a bandstand bash that captures some of jazz's most eloquent raconteurs inspiring each other to ever more vivid tales. In short, *Life In Real Time* is jazz that's the real deal.

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