

*CADENCE, October 2005*

Sal Mosca -- *Thing-Ah-Majig* -- Zinnia Records 118

I'm Getting Sentimental Over You / Nowhere / I'll Remember April / I Can't Get Started with You / How High the Moon / If I Had You (43:26)

Sal Mosca, p; Don Messina, b; Bill Chattin, d. -- Mt Vernon, NY, 3 May 2004

I've always thought of Mosca as one of Tristano's severer disciples, but quite possibly I've got things wrong: on the evidence of *Thing-Ah-Majig*, he could just as well be one of the piano's finest deadpan humorists since Thelonious Monk's Riverside days. (Just listen, for instance, to the start of "I'll Remember April," where he compresses the entire A section into a belated shrug.)

Mosca moves around in a piece with a go-anywhere freedom that defies the chord changes' steady linearity, as if taking shortcuts through a musical fourth dimension: sometimes he lingers in one spot for ages, seemingly indifferent to harmonic motion – on "How High the Moon," for example, he spends a full chorus noodling around "Ornithology"'s little triplet figure – while at other times he cuts across a piece precipitously, like some ancient Greek giving a virtuoso demonstration of conic sections.

For Mosca, playing is a kind of listening: there's a wait-till-the-penny-drops pause before virtually every phrase, as if he were responding to some inaudible stimulus in the ether, and his firmness of touch suggests not decisiveness but an exploratory probing of untested sonic space. His time-feel is unique, working to an inner clock that runs seemingly at three-quarters the speed of his accompanists. As a result, bassist Don Messina and drummer Bill Chittin are crucial presences, playing the changes "straight" but articulating them strongly and inventively: you can almost *feel* the tension in the air as pianist and rhythm section repeatedly grind against each other and diverge.

Mosca's had a difficult time of it lately: from 1998 to 2001 he was too ill to play at all; he recovered briefly, but in 2003 suffered a heart attack that put him out of action for another ten months. There's no hint of these difficulties on the CD: his control and focus remain, amazingly enough, pin-sharp. But the disc is suffused with the sense of a man taking thoughtful stock of his memories and his music, and while there's nothing sentimental in his playing (his chording is still sour as lemon-juice), this is music of great emotional resonance: listen, for instance, to the stoical, slow-drag reading of "If I Had You," whose gentle close suggests a pianist becoming lost in thought. It's a privilege, and a delight, to have Mosca back in the studio.

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