

THE STEVE SANDNER TRIO

Goin' To
Chicago

SPECIAL GUEST: MARCUS BELGRAVE

From the lightly swinging Steve Sandner version of Fats Waller's classic "I Got A Feeling I'm Falling" it's clear this pianist's rapport with bassist Stewart Miller and drummer Charles McFarlan yields a clean, concise, uptown sound. Add to their laid back swing Sandner's to-the-point vocal style and Marcus Belgrave's luxuriously free trumpet obbligatos, and you find a sublime expressiveness.

"I'd have to say this session you could call understated, it's laid back," says Sandner, 48, a journeyman jazz pianist, part of what John McDonough calls "that shamefully underrated breed of virtuosi whose brain cells carry vast libraries of melody." "For instance," says Sandner, "we take 'Let the Good Times Roll,' and whereas many versions you hear feature the horn section blasting away aboard a shuffle rhythm, when we did it I asked Charles McFarlan to just use brushes. That's the way Louis Jordan did his original recording."

Of course Ray Charles cut the number featuring a young Marcus Belgrave for "The Genius of Ray Charles" (Atlantic) in 1959. With Sandner, from his introductory declamation, to his riffs, fills, and brilliant solo, Belgrave tells the story of a song that once lived with him on the road and has come home to be as familiar as an old club chair.

"Marcus is just everything," waxes Sandner. "I was a trumpet player, and this is just better than the way I wish I would be able to do a gig if I were playing trumpet. I was really happy to have him on the session. I like the subtleties of his playing better than any player I can think of."

With the help of Chicagoan Judy Roberts, Sandner drew this trio together. His group plays regularly in Chicago, notably at Andy's, and has been a fixture at the pastoral Sutton's Bay Jazz Festival on Grand Traverse Bay in northern lower Michigan, success perhaps explained by McFarlan's 12 year musical association with the Playboy Clubs, and Miller's solid professionalism with the Glenn Miller Orchestra.

"I tried to pick tunes that felt good and are bluesy. I like that style of music, balancing between blues and jazz. I have a great rhythm section so I knew I wanted to get vehicles that would get us to swing," he explains. "They did."

He continues, "And with Marcus on the session, he brought it up a notch. He's such a versatile player. For instance, we do 'Goin' To Chicago Blues,' and he was all blues. Then for Fats Waller's 'I Got A Feeling I'm Falling' he does the plunger/trumpet thing. When I was learning jazz trumpet in high school, I thought that kind of thing was corny. I don't anymore. I was listening to Miles Davis so much then everything else seemed unhip. The way Marcus did it was just so right. I've grown to appreciate it."

Sandner began on piano at age four, led his own trio in high school, then went to the Berklee School of Music in Boston during the summer of love as a trumpet major. Playing around Boston coffee houses in a Berklee student combo featuring a teenage Michael Brecker on saxophone, Sandner found himself opening for the J. Giles Band.

"J. Giles asked me to go on the road with him to play piano," recalls Sandner. "I did play with the band for a couple of nights. I loved it, but it was different from playing jazz. I got a chance to play straight out blues. He gave me tips on what licks to play."

But Sandner had eyes for the University of Illinois jazz program in Champaign-Urbana, where John Garvey led a Count Basie style big band that also touched on the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis idiom of the late 1960's early 1970's. In addition to the big band, Sandner worked in combos, show bands and rock groups. "I hardly had time to go to classes," he admits.

Garvey shared with Sandner "his great concept of the details of articulation, especially the way to articulate jazz licks so that they'd swing."

Yoga brought Sandner to Detroit to study, and he bounced back and forth between Wayne State University and Eastern Michigan University, laying off the music for awhile.

But with marriage and a first child, Sandner soon got back to work, calling the Detroit musicians union to find out where the demand was: piano or trumpet? He got an answer that found him woodshedding piano in practice rooms at Wayne State, working out transposing, running through songs in every key, building his chops. Then he met Max Gail, one of Detroit's premier booking agents.

"There's a song on the album, 'Tain't Nobody's Business If I Do,' the blues classic, that one of the guys who got me restarted in music and introduced me to Max Gail wrote: that's Graham Prince. He wrote it with Clarence Williams," says Sandner. "Graham and I hit it right off. I look back on it and he was helping me: How to play behind singers, arranging, voicing, just little things that I didn't even know he was doing at the time. Also, he forced me to start singing on gigs...So, in a backdoor way, he was a big influence on my life."

"At the time I thought 'Tain't Nobody's Business' was a corny old vaudeville song that he was trying to teach me: I was going, what's this? He insisted we play it in the show we were putting together. I thought I'd just do it to appease this guy because he wrote it; I had no idea it was such a classic number. So I promised myself whenever I get a chance, I'm going to record that song and dedicate it to him."

Sandner takes it from the top, singing from the get-go, while the medium tempo cooks Marcus Belgrave's three choruses of harmon muted trumpet into a blue soufflé.

Gail placed Sandner's trio at the Otsego Ski Club from 1971-74. Oscar Peterson and Bud Powell were Sandner's main influences then, perhaps still evident in his playing on the 38 measure groove tune, with it's high-low theme, "Catch 38," or in his facility for sustaining a pretty ballad mood on "Daydream."

After the Otsego gig ran it's course, Sandner tried staying in Michigan by doing country music, but soon joined the Gaslight Clubs in Chicago, playing solo and trio at their Chateau Louise 40 miles outside of Chicago for the remainder of the 1970's. Taking his band into a club called Buttermen's in Elgin, Ill., Sandner played the jam session every Thursday night, meeting Chicago's wonderful jazz musicians and adding the Hammond B-3 organ to his act in the process.

"I like the B-3 because you can get into a blues groove, and that's the kind of groove I like to play," says Sandner, who's closest brush with a big time music career came at the end of the 1970's when a singer named Carolyn Ford offered him a year at Chicago's celebrity filled Pump Room. Sandner had the opportunity to be the house pianist at the club, in addition to the

commercial jingles he was dabbling in, but he missed his five children and moved back to Michigan, landing a five day a week jazz gig playing piano and B-3 with the Traverse City Jazz Quartet at The Cove in Leland, and Thursday nights at the Waterfront in Traverse City.

"The Traverse City Jazz Quartet was an R&B influenced jazz band," says Sandner. "'Big Deal' is a number we played, but on this record we do an unplugged version." Set in A minor, the number lays well on the trumpet, and the band's rhythmic approach is altogether different than any other groove on the album.

Throughout the 1980's and into the 1990's Sandner spent his time finding work in both the Traverse City/Leelanau Peninsula area and Chicago. He recorded his debut tape "Cherry Red," a tip of the hat to Traverse City's reputation as the Cherry Capitol of the World, and appears on Harry Goldson's regionally acclaimed CDs "Mood Swings Volumes I & II" (Weatherbird Records). During the late 80's Sandner played an extended engagement in Singapore.

Though down home blues done in an uptown fashion as on "Just A Little Bit" is where Sandner lives, his interaction with Belgrave's skipping improvised melodies on "I Was Doing All Right," and the trumpeter's running obbligato on "Between The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea" points the band towards a style of swing that simply delights a jazz fan.

"I feel really humble with some of the players that are around today, such as saxophonist Bill Sears up at Interlochen, or when I hear some of the players here in Chicago. I go, well, I'm not really a jazz player, I'm more of a blues player," he laughs. For a pianist who's always kept his hand in play in the commercial musical world, Sandner's frequent return to jazz, especially with the band in this CD, is welcomed by a growing number of listeners here in Michigan and around Chicago.

—Lazaro Vega

Lazaro Vega is jazz director at Blue Lake Public Radio where he is heard six days a week on WBLV FM 90.3/WBLU FM 88.9, serving Grand Rapids and all of West Michigan. His articles on jazz appear regularly in The Grand Rapids Press.

1. I'VE GOT A FEELING I'M FALLING 4:08
(w. Billy Rose, m. Thomas "Fats" Waller & Harry Link) Anne-Rachel Music - ASCAP
2. GOIN' TO CHICAGO BLUES 3:58
(w/m Jimmy Rushing, James Andrew & Count Basie) Bregman Vocco & Conn Inc - ASCAP
3. CATCH 38 7:48
(Steve Sandner) Air-Lee Music - ASCAP
4. LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL 3:41
(w/m Fleece Moore, Sam Theard) EMI Music Publishing - ASCAP
5. JUST A LITTLE BIT* 3:45
(Del Gordon) Bab-Roc Music - BMI
6. I WAS DOIN' ALL RIGHT 4:18
(w. Ira Gershwin, m. George Gershwin) George Gershwin Music - ASCAP
7. IT DON'T MEAN A THING IF IT AIN'T GOT THAT SWING 4:09
(w. Irving Mills, m. Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington) Duke Ellington Music - ASCAP
8. I AIN'T GOT NOTHIN' BUT THE BLUES 4:04
(w/m Larry Fotin, Don George, Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington) Music Sales Corp - ASCAP
9. BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA 4:04
(w. Ted Koehler, m. Harold Arlen) Fred Ahlert Music Corp/SA Music - ASCAP
10. DAYDREAM* 4:43
(w/m J. LaTouche, Billy Strayhorn, Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington) EMI Music - ASCAP
11. 'TAIN'T NOBODY'S BUSINESS 4:37
(w/m Robert Graham Prince, Percival Harkness Granger, Clarence Williams) MCA Music - ASCAP
12. BIG DEAL 5:14
(Steve Sandner) Air-Lee Music - ASCAP

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**trio only*

Steve Sandner: piano & vocals, Marcus Belgrave:
trumpet & flugelhorn, Charles McFarlan: drums,
Stewart Miller: bass

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Charles McFarlan: drums
Stewart Miller: bass
MARCUS BELGRAVE: TRUMPET & FLUGELHORN



Goin' to Chicago

The Steve Sandner Trio

special guest

Marcus Belgrave







