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Adrianna Miki



Woody Witt



Apria

Records

Tom Beckham



B.D. Lenz



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Label Spotlight: Apria Records

By Annie Simmons

In the dog days of a declining jazz market share in the record bins, and fear over the digital download reigning supreme, there are independent jazz labels with enough courage and conviction to find artists that are worthy of the investment. Apria Records is one of those labels. Run by an ex-drummer who took the "safe" route after starting a family, label owner, Steve Wilkinson started Apria nearly six years ago.

Wilkinson came from a musical family whose love of jazz exposed his young ears to the likes of Miles, Freddie Hubbard, Clifford Brown, Maynard and many others. "My father and brother were trumpet players, so by the time I was thirteen, we worked in bars and coffee clubs about an hour outside of Gary, Indiana," reflected Wilkinson. "It was quite an experience for a young kid." He ended up moving to St. Louis in the 1970s and started working professionally in the jazz scene, which he did for a number of years. His father was really staunch about having a second career — doing something professionally and making music secondary. With a growing family, working days and nights took

their toll and Steve made the decision to focus on the day job. "I dropped out of the scene for a while and did Systems Consulting for about ten years," said Wilkinson, "But I started to lose my soul, so that's where music came back in and brought me back to life. I decided to open the label back in 2002 or 2003."

Steve Wilkinson had a firm vision for the label and the artists he was seeking out. "When I got back into this business," said Wilkinson, "I decided to do the contemporary vibe. Going back to the sixties, I really dug groups like Blood, Sweat & Tears, Chase—the list goes on. Take that pop vibe and combine it with very hip jazz players—that's been the direction of the label. I'm not a hard-core traditionalist by any means. My idea of music is something that is accessible to everybody, not just the hard-core traditional enthusiasts. With many forms of jazz, a person has to have musical knowledge to really appreciate a lot of this stuff. I think that jazz can be accessible to a wide group of people. Randy Brecker has had a major influence on me musically."

In choosing artists for Apria, Wilkinson goes back to his jazz roots. "Compositional expertise is the principal thing. I look for artists that understand composition and can do traditional jazz, and contemporary—people that are schooled in both areas and have knowledge. B.D. Lenz is a fabulous example. He studied jazz in Los Angeles and if you listen to him play, he is in no way traditional, but he has a wonderful understanding of jazz in its traditional form. You won't understand that it's jazz when you hear him playing and he incorporates these subtleties in his music."

Apria has some new releases coming down the pike and he took some time to reflect upon his artists. "I knew B.D. before I started the label. I've followed his independent stuff and what knocked me out was that it's so 'hard fusion' — borderline on rock. If you go back to his early stuff, you would think that is rock, but it's not. He's always had magnificent players: Geoff Mattoon, Tom Cottone — he's been working with the same cats for like six years."

"I met Woody [Witt] through Randy [Becker]. Woody called me and he said, 'Hey, I've got this CD that I did with Randy and Dave Kikoski,' and I knew those cats because I had worked with them, so I said, 'Sure, send it over!' Blew me away, man! Woody's a fabulous composer and he's an educator. I thought this is a great spring board for his work. Woody's a great guy. The CD that's coming out is going to be fabulous."

"I've never met vocalist Adriana Miki in any way. She heard of me through Ronaldo Folegatti down in Rio. Ronaldo and I did a project about four years ago at Bennett Studios. Adriana lives in Portu-

gal right now, but she's actually Brazilian. Her husband, Sergio, is a musician as well and helps her with production. They're great people. They contacted me and we talked about her project for about a year and a half. Her music is lyrical and it's got a great vibe. I know that people will be taken with her music."

"Tom Beckham has a new CD coming out called *Rebound*. Tom has so many fans and the vibes — it's such a great instrument! [It] beats keys. That's the way I see it. I talked to Tom on and off for about a year. I think he originally approached Francois Zalacain of Sunnyside. But Francois had too many irons in the fire at the time. So he referred Tom to me, which turned out to be great. He's eventually approached me and asked me to release his CD. I heard it and thought, 'This guy is great! 100% brains!' He's got a great sound."

For Steve Wilkinson, he's looking at the long term for Apria Records. "I didn't want to work with well established artists— I'm into *developing* artists. I want to take somebody that doesn't have a big presence and try to build it. That's the whole fringing excitement for me. A lot of it also has to do with the artist doing their job of securing performances and to assist in doing the promotional work for the CD. That's the way it's always been and for me, that's the best way in my opinion. As long as they are out there performing, people will buy. Jazz just has something

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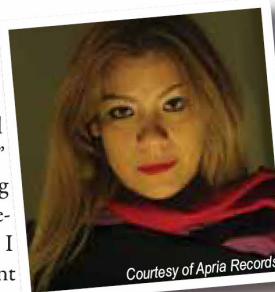
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Courtesy of Apria Records

ADRIANA MIKI (from her MySpace page)

Music has been part of my soul since before I could walk... As a child playing under the stairs... it would be all around me...

adding tone and color to my world...making my heart beat faster...I've never really understood that sensation ...Music, forever my companion... Time passed and I grew up...during my whole life I had music as part of every moment...in my happiness...my fears...my passions...my solitude... and I sang...always singing. But it was always just for me....I think deep down I had a fear of the powerful emotion that singing stirred in me...it would take hold of me and give me the strength to overcome any sadness. And so I continued like this for a long time...singing for myself...I crossed oceans...and eventually couldn't run any longer from that which I truly desired. Couldn't deny any longer that which I truly am. And so I decided to express singing all that is inside of me.



JJ: Could you talk about your current CD *Straight Up* on Apria Records and your creation of the music and selection of personnel and how the music might have developed over time and in the studio?

BDL: In order to give you perspective on the approach I wanted to take with this recording you have to understand that my previous efforts were pretty big productions with complex arrangements. This culminated with *Tomorrow's Too Late* (2005) which became a huge undertaking. That record had like 13 musicians, was done in many studios, recorded on many recording platforms, etc. It was an ambitious record but stressful at the same time. So much so that by the end I promised myself that the next recording I'd do would be *much* more straightforward. Don't get my wrong, I was *really* proud of that record but I wanted to take a different approach as not to keep making the same album. That was the philosophy behind *Straight Up*. I just wanted to take a quartet live in the studio and knock it out with little or no overdubs which was contrary to how we had done it in the past. The tunes are still arranged, but there were no four page charts this time!

JJ: Tell us about your associations with keyboardist Joe Ashlar, bassist James Rosocha and drummer Tom Cortone and how the long-time relationships have grown to develop the dialogue and interplay in the group?

BDL: It seems rare in the jazz world to have a steady band for such a long period of time. Of course, there

are always new guys in and out of my band either for one gig or for a series of gigs but Tom and James have been my core rhythm section for over ten years. And while it's always fun to bring new people in it's also great to be comfortable with a group of like-minded musicians. The keyboard player Joe Ashlar had only played with us for about 6 months before the recording but as soon as we started playing together I knew he would round out the lineup perfectly.

JJ: What were the benefits and challenges you experienced in developing your musical skills, creativity, artistry in the formalized educational setting at the Musicians Institute and later at the College of New Jersey?

BDL: The benefits of learning at a school are pretty obvious. You have access to knowledgeable professionals who can guide you in all aspects of playing/composing music. You're also around like-minded people who want to learn the very same thing which is very inspiring. The down side of this environment is that you can get lost in the shuffle. You also have to be careful of a school stripping away your musical identity.

JJ: Could you talk about some of the jazz artists and/or recordings that inspired you to pursue this creative path?

BDL: Mike Stern; Pat Metheny's *Still Life Talking* was another revelation to me - the beautiful mix of jazz & Brazilian music. These listening experiences encouraged me to go back and do the important jazz listening that need to be done - Miles, Coltrane, etc. - But I came to jazz from the rock/fusion path then from the direct Bebop path.

JJ: Talk about some of the observations you made and/or lessons learned in some of your musical experiences with Randy Brecker, Mark Egan, others... that made a significant impact on you personally or your artistry?

BDL: Working with legendary musicians like this has shown me, on the one hand, why these guys are as big as they are. They're complete pros from knowing their instruments to getting a great sound to reading down charts. But, on the other hand, I've been able to see that they're human just like me. They still hustle for gigs just like I do. They still have to keep their chops up just like I do. Randy Brecker actually said to me that he thought my charts were pretty difficult which really surprised me. I told him that after his composition "Some Skunk Funk," I thought every-

thing was easy. But, being able to play with guys like that gives me more confidence that I have the ability to reach that level myself.

JJ: Could you share some of your perspectives about learning how to improvise and the process of improvisation?

BDL: I can't say in all honesty that I have any unique perspective or unique approach to improvising. I haven't blazed any new trails in terms of improvising itself. After masters such as John Coltrane or Pat Metheny who could? What I can say is that is that I strive hard within my compositions to make interesting context for improvisation. I believe that the musical environment in which a solo takes place is usually more important than the solo itself. I try to write in a way that allows the solo to help develop the tune and I also try to set up situations that will inspire the soloist to make a particular solo unique from the other eight on the record!

JJ: What are some of the essential non-musical qualities that artists who are seeking success and respect in the music industry must develop?

BDL: One of the most important for sure is perseverance. Needless to say this a VERY hard business. You'll hear many more "no's" than "yes's" and you have to learn to accept that. Careers go up and down but if you stay focused you'll be able to weather the roller coaster a bit easier. Perspective is also extremely important. It's easy to let other people's success make you feel insecure or let other people's lesser success inflate your ego. And that brings me to the next one which is humility. I don't care how great you are nobody wants to hang out with a dick. Sometimes your vibe between sets is just as important as your skill during the set, and if you're just a cool person to be with, sometimes you'll get the gig over the guy who is an amazing musician but sucks to be with. I can vouch for that myself when calling guys to play with me.

JJ: How do you stay balanced—as an artist, as an individual given the many distractions that surround us and the stress?

BDL: We all have to remember that we are human beings before we are musicians. And as such it's very important to take care of yourself physically and spiritually. Although it can be difficult I try give myself one day a week that's a 'no-practice' day. I'm married with two kids so I have to make sure I don't neglect my personal relationships as well. It's very hard to keep a good balance but if you can do it it will only help your musicality because your head will be in a much better place and since jazz has such a high demand on creativity, mental clarity is of utmost importance. ■

B.D. is working on a new recording that is due out at the end of this year that will feature drummer Joel Rosenblatt and bassist Will Lee.