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Bay Area jazz band Times 4 breaking new ground with latest CD 'Eclipse'

By Jim Harrington
Oakland Tribune
Posted: 01/11/2010 01:00:00 AM PST
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There may come a day when Times 4, the popular Bay Area groove-jazz quartet, can operate at a somewhat leisurely pace in the studio. But that definitely wasn't the case while recording the band's third CD, "Eclipse."

"We recorded it all in two days — just blasted through it," says Times 4 saxophonist Lincoln Adler. "We just played the songs as we would live. We realized that the band sounds best when the band plays live."

So it's appropriate that Times 4 will celebrate the release of "Eclipse" by doing what it does best — playing live. The group is set to perform Monday at Yoshi's at Jack London Square in Oakland, the first chance for fans to pick up copies of the new album. (The CD is also available to order through the band's Web site, www.times4music.com.)

"Eclipse" is another step forward for one of the Bay Area's premier jazz outfits. For one thing, it was recorded at a major league venue, Fantasy Studios in Berkeley, which gave the group access to top-tier recording equipment. That factored most strongly into Greg Sankovich's performance, who had used a basic synthesizer on the group's prior two studio efforts — 2005's "Seductivity" and 2007's "Relations" — but used a variety of keyboards, including a choice Fender Rhodes, on "Eclipse."

"Greg was in heaven," laughs Adler, who, like Sankovich, grew up and still lives in the Berkeley area. "And I think that affected the



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band's whole sound."

This was also the first CD the band produced on its own.

"It's just another step in our learning process," said bassist Kevin Lofton, a San Jose native who now lives in Oakland. "Another couple of notches on the belt as far as becoming complete musicians."

There are some potential downsides to self-producing a record — there's no third party to blame if the disc doesn't turn out well. On the other hand, says Lofton, "You are in complete control. You get to really put yourself out there. You have the freedom to do what you want."

Times 4, which also includes San Jose native Maurice Miles on drums, is one of the relatively few local jazz acts known for performing mostly original compositions. In that aspect, "Eclipse" marks another turning point for the band as it includes Times 4's first two recorded cover songs: a rendition of John Coltrane's famous ballad "Naima" and the Miles Davis-Ron Carter modal blues number "81."

"We definitely wanted to put a different spin on those," Lofton says of the tracks. "There are certainly recognizable, but they are the Times 4 versions."

Back in Time

The origin of Times 4, group's origin can be traced back to 2003, when Miles, who now lives in Menlo Park, and Adler met at a contemporary jazz concert in San Francisco. The two players started talking music, found that they shared similar tastes, and quickly decided that a jam session was in order.

They invited Miles' friend Lofton and Adler's pal Sankovich to the party and Times 4 was born. The band's first regular gig was at Straits restaurant in San Jose's Santana Row, where the players spent two years refining their instrumental, improvisational mix of funk, soul, R&B, Latin, hip-hop and contemporary jazz sounds.

With the release of two records and countless live shows, Times 4 was able to build a sizable following in the Bay Area. Some of its more impressive accomplishments include headlining Yoshi's in San Francisco, performing at the Mountain Winery in Saratoga, appearing at the Mount Diablo Jazz Festival at Concord's mammoth Sleep Train Pavilion and sharing the stage with such big-names acts as Al Jarreau, Chris Botti, Dave Koz and Patti Austin.

Those types of bookings aren't easy to get for an unsigned local jazz band. But Times 4 got help from the legendary (and now defunct) Bay Area smooth-jazz radio station KKSF, which championed the group for years. Yet the group's success mostly has to do with old-fashioned hard work and fine musicianship.

Also, something's very appealing about the collaborative nature of this band. There's no leader in Times 4 (a factor that separates the group from the majority of jazz combos on the planet), just the collective joy that comes from making music among friends. The mood is set with the songwriting process.

"We are really very democratic in the way we write songs," Adler says. "We just sit down together, all four of us, and we write the tunes."

Now, the group has a new batch of material to showcase from "Eclipse." Times 4 hopes to tour in support of the CD, at least through the Pacific Northwest, and expand its fan base past the Bay Area. The recent loss of KKSF, as well as several other contemporary jazz radio stations, will hurt. Yet, as Lofton says, the band members can't worry about that.

"We feel like our resume is really strong," he says. "We are just waiting to see what the environment is, and then how we want to position ourselves. The main thing is for us to keep putting out quality products."

Read Jim Harrington's Concert Blog at <http://blogs.mercurynews.com/aei/category/concerts/>.

PREVIEW

- WHO: Times 4
- WHEN: 8 p.m. Monday
- WHERE: Yoshi's at Jack London Square, 510 Embarcadero West, Oakland
- TICKETS: \$16; 510-238-9200, www.yoshis.com

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