



December 2021

*The History of Us* is a wonderful addition to the body of work trombonist William Carn and saxophonist Tara Davidson have produced as co-leaders of The Carn Davidson 9. The outfit, which the married couple formed in 2010, is distinctive for featuring seven horns, bass, and drums, and, on this recording, comes across as more chamber jazz ensemble than blowing vehicle. Consistent with that is the material the leaders fashioned for the album, with both composing three-part suites grounded in personal experience. Adding to the release's appeal is its symmetrical design: between the suites is a heartfelt tribute to the couple's beloved cat, who passed on in June 2021. In fact, Murphy was such a strong presence in their lives, they titled their 2017 album after him.

Adding to the impact of the suites is the fact that all six movements are rooted in personal history, specifically the migration of Carn's ancestors from Hong Kong to Canada and the appreciation by Davidson for her late mother and father. The experience of listening to the material resonates much more powerfully when it carries with it such deep meaning for those who created it and when it's so easily relatable to others with their own stories of loss and migration. There's warmth too in the playing, that attributable in part to the fact that the musicians involved have shared histories that go back many years. The impression created is of friends gathering to midwife the leaders' vision into being.

In the woodwinds department there's Davidson (alto and soprano sax, clarinet, flute, piccolo), Kelly Jefferson (tenor and soprano sax, clarinet), and Shirantha Beddage (baritone sax, bass clarinet); for the horns, Carn's joined by Jason Logue and Kevin Turcotte (trumpet, flugelhorn) and Christian Overton (bass trombone), and acoustic bassist Andrew Downing and drummer Ernesto Cervini handle the bottom end. The leaders take solos, naturally, but so too do others, and the album's all the better for featuring a number of voices. While Turcotte enlivens the opening track with a potent statement, Beddage does the same for the first suite's closing movement. Turcotte distinguishes "The Epitaph - For Mom," the opening part of Davidson's piece, with a florid, rhythmically charged turn, and the composer elevates "Wisely If Sincerely" with a soaring soprano sax solo. Animating the players effectively are Downing and Cervini, who provide solid and responsive support throughout without overpowering.

Carn's *Finding Home Suite* begins with "A New Life," inspired by his parents' move from Hong Kong to Costa Rica (William's birthplace), and ends with "Home," which alludes to the

family's ultimate destination, Canada. In between, "A Mother's Life" draws for inspiration from a lullaby William's mother sang to him as a baby. The chamber jazz style asserts itself at the outset in Carn's quasi-orchestral arrangement and in the way his writing exploits the range of colour afforded by the woodwinds and horns. While one might generally associate such mellifluous textures with a big band, the group generates a sound larger than expected for a nine-member unit. Whereas the opening movement is robust, the second is often tender in keeping with the natural affection a son has for his mother; consistent with that is Carn's solo, which feels like a memory-infused expression drawn from deep within. Speaking of affection, the lustrous harmonies that elevate the closing movement speak to the composer's genuine love for his homeland; a clear impression of the majesty of Canada's landscapes also arises in a setting beautifully capped by an instrumental voicing of a Buddhist chant he grew up hearing in the family household.

Following Carn's moving Murphy tribute "Goodbye Old Friend" (the inclusion of the cat purring at the piece's end is touching too) is Davidson's *Suite 1985*, which opens with an homage to her mother, who died at forty-two from breast cancer in 1985. In the insistent tone of the writing, the composer celebrates the determination with which her mom fought the disease before eventually succumbing to it. "Swept Out To Sea - For Dad" memorializes her father, who passed on thirty years after his wife and whose death was the impetus for the suite's creation. A solo intro featuring Downing on bowed bass gives the movement the character of a lament, a feel that carries on through this dignified expression. If the closer "Wisely If Sincerely" feels jubilant, it's by design, Davidson fashioning this part to celebrate her family's Scottish heritage and using the ensemble's singing voices to evoke the sound of bagpipes and Scottish folk songs.

As much as some of the album material is informed by grief, the tone isn't grim. Instead, the writing is generally buoyant and celebratory. As big as the nonet's sound can be, it never loses the intimacy material of such personal meaning demands. Both of the earlier Carn Davidson 9 releases received JUNO nominations for 'Jazz Album of the Year,' and the evidence suggests the third could well be recognized with the same honour.

*Ron Schepper*