



Over the years Tommy Flanagan has acquired a reputation for being the accompanist par excellence. There is nothing either wrong or surprising about this, for Flanagan really *is* the accompanist par excellence. The only trouble is that so exalted has his reputation become as a support for the exercises of more famous performers that his own talents as a leading man have tended to be overlooked. Probably it has something to do with the man's almost flamboyantly modest demeanor at the keyboard; he has a mild, unruffled, scholarly appearance which might have been specifically designed for self-effacement, so that at, say, a concert at which he has been the very embodiment of tact in sketching in backgrounds for Ella Fitzgerald, he appears most ingeniously to have merged himself utterly into the background. So much for appearances.

There is something paradoxical about all this; making yourself preeminent at the art of making yourself secondary is an activity with more than enough built-in irony. It is therefore a very good thing that having paid the price for being so exquisitely tactful a prompter of others, Flanagan should unassumingly turn up with an album like this one, in which he refutes his bridesmaid status by giving a highly exhilarating exhibition of solo jazz piano. Of course, nobody who has kept both ears open at concerts where Flanagan has been the accompanist will be surprised in the least by the high class of the playing here, for he is a musician with a delightfully fastidious touch and an improvising mind of such sweet reason that he makes everything sound rather simple. Listening to him playing *Daydream*, for

instance, I was reminded of the great truth about performance, which is that when you know how to do it, you can always seem to be doing it without undue difficulty. In my own teens, *Daydream* was one of those hurdles which as an apprentice saxophonist I could never quite clear, either to my own or anyone else's satisfaction. When Flanagan plays it, it ceases to be a hurdle at all.

Flanagan was born in 1930, which means that the great creative jazz figure of his emergent years was Duke Ellington. Appropriately, all the music on this album was written by Duke Ellington. That is to say, some of it was composed by Billy Strayhorn. And to complicate matters further, some of it was written by Ellington and Strayhorn together, and nobody including Strayhorn and Ellington, could tell you who wrote what. There are, of course, differences between the two men, just as there were differences between them as pianists. (Duke's touch was much heavier, Strayhorn's technique much more apparent.) As writers, they were, however, so much in each other's pockets at the end that, today when people talk of the Ellington oeuvre, it is understood that Strayhorn is included. I am relieved about this, for it saves me from the embarrassing job of trying to decide whether *Something to Live For* is typically Duke or typically Strayhorn. It was written in 1939 and must have been one of the first successful collaborations between the two men. Today it is an archetype, a perfect example of the sophisticated torch-song of the 1940s, with that chord-change at the start of the third bar as the badge of its decade. The Flanagan version is extremely moving, one of the

best piano readings of the song ever made.

What is rather more surprising is the amount of sheer muscle that has gone into *Take the "A" Train*. The treatment is conventional enough, right down to the old Ellington orchestral paraphrase which opens the seventh chorus. But the actual piano jazz is a revelation. Once the theme has been laid down and the trio moves into the second chorus, with the drums raising the temperature of the performance, Flanagan plays with all the fire and passion which people sometimes mistakenly assume must be absent in a decorous accompanist. Class of a different kind manifests itself in *All Day Long*, where, in the second chorus, again after the theme statement, Flanagan produces some really beautiful melodic aphorisms as he strings his choruses together. And so on. The convention of performance will by now have become clear. In the up tempo tracks, the theme is recited, then the piano launches into improvisation, and then, usually around the third chorus, drums and bass raise their game and the trio starts to sound like six men having a good time. The ballads are merely ballads, although "merely" is a woefully inadequate word to use in reference to performances like *Something to Live For* and *Daydream*. As to ballads, while listening to *Chelsea Bridge*, which must surely be the most ethereal piece ever composed by a jazz musician, the thought struck me yet again that if Strayhorn never knew of Ravel's *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales* when he wrote *Chelsea Bridge*, then the only conclusion left is that great minds think alike.

The support for the arch-supporter Flanagan is provided by two of the best

small group players in jazz today, Keter Betts and Bobby Durham. I used to enjoy Betts long before I ever heard of him, for in the days when I was naive enough not to conceal the fact that I enjoyed Earl Bostic, and later, when I first got swept away on the tide of Dinah Washington's vocal ego, I was hearing Betts without realizing it. When I first heard the Flanagan sides, I checked the situation out, and am now landed with the suspicion that Betts is a more accomplished and powerful player than he was in those days. As for Durham, my introduction to him was in circumstances so spectacular that I have never forgotten them, and surely never will. I saw him playing with Oscar Peterson at an English country house where Toulouse-Lautrec originals hung on the drawing room wall and the total audience was eighteen. The occasion was a private party, thrown by what I assume was an English aristocrat; if he was not an aristocrat, he was at least rich enough to be one, and at one stage of the evening the sons and heirs of the house were brought down in their pajamas, placed next to Durham, and allowed to submerge their ten-year-old sensibilities in the great wash of brilliant drumming that Durham was producing. I thought at the time that such exposures can only do the English aristocracy a power of good, for the drumming exemplified several virtues which the English aristocracy seems to be a bit short on these days, including an impeccable sense of time and an infallible good taste, the identical virtues, in fact, that may be found on all these tracks.

—Benny Green

These notes appeared on the original album liner



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PLACE  
 STAMP  
 HERE

1. ALL DAY LONG 5:12  
(Billy Strayhorn) Tempo Music, Inc.-ASCAP
2. UMMG 4:42  
(UPPER MANHATTAN MEDICAL GROUP)  
(Strayhorn) Tempo-ASCAP
3. SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR 3:04  
(Ellington-Strayhorn) EMI Music Publ.-ASCAP
4. MAIN STEM 6:55  
(Duke Ellington) EMI Robbins Catalog Inc.-ASCAP
5. DAYDREAM 4:40  
(Latouche-Ellington-Strayhorn) EMI Robbins-ASCAP
6. THE INTIMACY OF THE BLUES 6:10  
(Strayhorn) Tempo-ASCAP
7. CARAVAN 6:46  
(Tizol-Ellington-Mills) Mills Music, Inc.-ASCAP
8. CHELSEA BRIDGE 6:17  
(Strayhorn) Tempo-ASCAP
9. TAKE THE "A" TRAIN 5:17  
(Strayhorn) Tempo-ASCAP

TOMMY FLANAGAN—piano

KETER BETTS—bass

BEBBY DURHAM—drums

Produced by NORMAN GRANZ

Recorded in Tokyo, Japan; February 15, 1975.

Digital remastering, 1992—Phil De Lancie (Fantasy Studios, Berkeley)

Art direction—Phil Carroll

Design—Gilles Margerin

Photography—Norman Granz

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TOMMY FLANAGAN THE TOKYO RECITAL

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OJCCD-737-2 (2310724)

1. ALL DAY LONG 5:12
2. UMMG (UPPER MANHATTAN MEDICAL GROUP) 4:42
3. SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR 3:04
4. MAIN STEM 6:55
5. DAYDREAM 4:40
6. THE INTIMACY OF THE BLUES 6:10
7. CARAVAN 6:46
8. CHELSEA BRIDGE 6:17
9. TAKE THE "A" TRAIN 5:17

TOMMY FLANAGAN—piano  
KETER BETTS—bass  
BOBBY DURHAM—drums

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TOTAL TIME 50:00  
Total time has been rounded off  
to the nearest minute.

STEREO



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