



# Grant Stewart

*Plays the Music of  
Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn*

Tardo Hammer  
Paul Gill  
Joe Farnsworth

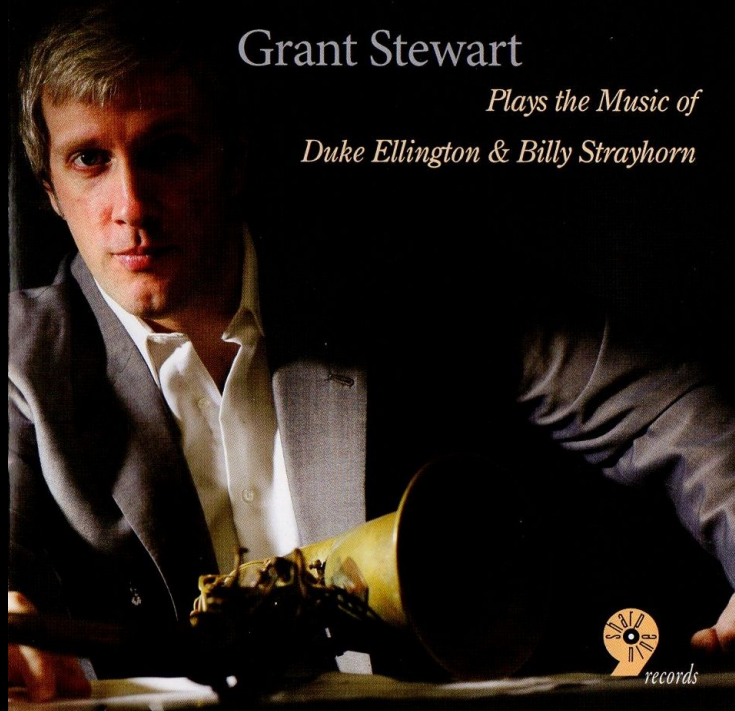
- 1 *Raincheck*
- 2 *Tonight I Shall Sleep*
- 3 *Angelica*
- 4 *I Let a Song Go Out  
of My Heart*
- 5 *It Don't Mean a Thing*
- 6 *Something to Live For*
- 7 *The Star Crossed Lovers*
- 8 *The Feeling of Jazz*



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**G**RANT STEWART'S emergence on the New York scene nearly 20 years ago was greeted with little fanfare by the jazz establishment. To these arbiters of the new and trendy, Stewart was easy to overlook. But for the cognoscenti for whom the aesthetic glories of modern jazz had hardly been exhausted, Stewart was a tonic, a galvanizing figure whose early appearances signaled the arrival of a player not only of impressive technique, but with a sound and approach to the tenor saxophone that recalled the storied lineage of his instrument.

Stewart heard a great deal of classic jazz, jump blues, and *Ellingtonia* in his boyhood home in Toronto where his father Norman, a high school English teacher and jazz guitarist, fostered his son's career with patient, insistent tutelage. "My father made

me keep up with my practicing," Grant recalls. "He'd slow down reel-to-reel tape recordings he'd made of classic solos by Prez, Bird, and Wardell Gray and transcribe them for me. Then we'd play duets on these tunes. Today he's overjoyed that I have a career playing jazz."

In addition to his rapid development — by age 14 he was playing in a big band led by his first saxophone teacher, Pete Scofield, soon followed by formative encounters with saxophonists Pat La Barbara and Bob Mover — Stewart formed a stoical conviction that jazz had timeless attributes worthy of emulation.

"I checked out heavy metal and many different types of music as a teenager, but I was always listening to and playing jazz as well," he recalls. "Truth is, I had a sense that great jazz is timeless and there was no need to worry about trends and fashions. In my generation there's so much pressure to be hip and current. But I find it's best to stick to what feels true to yourself."

Stewart jump-starts this session with *Raincheck*, a Strayhorn original that was among a spate of tunes he composed in 1941 when Ellington was prohibited from recording his own material because of a strike against ASCAP-licensed music by the American Federation of Musicians. Sonny Rollins recorded *Raincheck* in 1953, one of the few instances in which an up-tempo Ellington or Strayhorn tune was covered by a modern jazz artist back in the day. Grant utilizes Sonny's changes, which he says are a little simpler for blowing on than the original. Following a bracing exchange of fours with Joe Farnsworth and Tardo Hammer, Stewart caps the tune with a climactic flutter.

Grant says "it feels great to play the melody" of *Tonight I Shall Sleep (With a Smile on My Face)*, which evinces a feeling of sated repose in this exquisite example of his ballad artistry. Ellington composed the tune in 1943, and its premiere recording in 1945 featured trombonist Tommy Dorsey

in a guest appearance with the band. Stewart's sumptuous tone underscores Duke's observation that "night life is cut out of a very luxurious, royal-blue bolt of velvet. It sparkles in tingling and tinkling tones."

*Angelica and The Feeling of Jazz* are best known through Ellington's 1962 recording with John Coltrane. The former, originally titled "Purple Gazelle," was introduced on Ellington's *Afro-Bossa*, which Duke called a celebration of "an exotic new wave." It's worth noting that while Grant occasionally makes subtle use of some of Coltrane's harmonic innovations, his sound betrays little of Trane's pervasive influence. Here he summons "All God's Children" to the dance floor over Farnsworth's infectious Latin groove.

*I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart*, one of Ellington's biggest Swing Era successes, was introduced on a 1938 Cootie Williams small group date in which the melodic lead was shared by the band's two great Boston-born

saxophonists, Johnny Hodges and Harry Carney. Grant knows **I Let a Song** best from Thelonious Monk's Riverside recording *Monk Plays Duke*, and here introduces the tune with a Monk-like four bar phrase. In his solo, he deftly inserts the melody of "My Kinda Love," a Jazz Age ballad premiered by Bing Crosby and later updated by Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald.

Stewart says he "tries to do an up-tempo tune on every recording," and **It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)** fills the bill here.

Grant's tour-de-force is inspired by a version that appeared on *Max Roach + 4*, which featured Rollins and Kenny Dorham, but its AABA form and brilliant execution also bring to mind Charlie Parker's "Ko Ko." Farnsworth's propulsive stroke fuels a breathless series of 16th note passages in the eight-chorus solo by Stewart, whose ability to maintain his robust lyricism at this tempo is extraordinary. Grant extols Joe as

"one-of-a-kind. He's got that tipping thing that really fuels his drumming and gives it that rhythmic drive."

**Something to Live For**, introduced in 1939, was the first Strayhorn piece recorded by Ellington, who later described this wistful ballad as a personal favorite. Grant's swinging take utilizes Bob Mover's medium tempo arrangement, including a nicely contoured introduction that Mover cobbled together from Charles Mingus's *Tijuana Moods*.

**The Star-Crossed Lovers** was composed by Strayhorn as "Pretty Little Girl," and recorded under that title by Johnny Hodges in 1955. Two years later, it re-emerged as the Romeo and Juliet theme in *Such Sweet Thunder*, the Shakespearean work that Duke premiered at the Stratford Festival in Ontario. Tardo's introduction is delightfully Ducal.

Hammer, who is hailed by producer Marc Edelman as "the Underground King of New York bebop piano"



has been featured on all three of Grant's Sharp Nine releases. Stewart asserts that "not many pianists have gotten so creative in the Bud Powell-Sonny Clark idiom as Tardo. I feed off his comping, which is really inspiring."

**The Feeling of Jazz**, which was conceived as the theme song for Mercer Ellington's early 1960's radio show on WLIB, is a fitting closer for this date. Its bluesy, after-hours groove includes a bowed chorus by Paul Gill, whose rich tone and precise intonation are steady features throughout.

Soon after this session, I heard Stewart perform in a concert tribute to the late tenor saxophonist Clifford Jordan in Mount Vernon, New York. I sensed that Grant was unknown to many in attendance, but judging by the passionate response to his playing, they won't soon forget him. No doubt the same can be said for any of you who are new to the sound of Grant Stewart.

—Tom Reney

Host of "Jazz à la Mode"  
at WFCR in Amherst,  
Massachusetts.





# Grant Stewart

*Plays the Music of  
Duke Ellington & Billy Strayhorn*



Produced by Marc Edelman  
Recorded on January 26, 2009 at  
Systems Two, Brooklyn, NY  
Recorded by Joe Marciano  
Mixed and Mastered by Mike Marciano  
Photography: John Abbott  
Session Photography: Gabrielle Lurie  
Graphic Design: Judy Lamirand, Parallel Design

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Sharp Nine Records CD 1044-2

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|---|---|-------|
| 1 | <b>Raincheck</b><br>Billy Strayhorn / ASCAP                               | 6:26  |
| 2 | <b>Tonight I Shall Sleep</b><br>Duke Ellington / ASCAP                    | 7:46  |
| 3 | <b>Angelica</b><br>Duke Ellington / ASCAP                                 | 8:18  |
| 4 | <b>I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart</b><br>D. Ellington, I. Mills / ASCAP  | 7:21  |
| 5 | <b>It Don't Mean a Thing</b><br>D. Ellington, I. Mills / ASCAP            | 5:53  |
| 6 | <b>Something to Live For</b><br>D. Ellington, B. Strayhorn / ASCAP        | 7:07  |
| 7 | <b>The Star Crossed Lovers</b><br>D. Ellington, B. Strayhorn / ASCAP      | 7:18  |
| 8 | <b>The Feeling of Jazz</b><br>D. Ellington, G. Simon,<br>B. Troup / ASCAP | 9:10  |
|   | <b>TOTAL TIME</b>   | 59:23 |

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Grant Stewart  
tenor saxophone

Tardo Hammer  
piano

Paul Gill  
bass

Joe Farnsworth  
drums



records

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