

the unshakeable being of lightsey

"Bradley's was my home," planist Kirk Lightsey says over the phone for his actual residence in Paris. He's talking about the famed (and recently closed) saloon on University Place in Manhattan, one of the last great New York piano bars and a listening post that is already sorely missed. In the 1980s, Lightsey could often be found seated at Bradley's Baldwin grand, building his reputation as he added to that club's storied legacy. Or seated at the club's long mahogany bar. "After a gig in New York, we all went to Bradley's for that last drink, that last set," says Lightsey. "I knew I could find anyone I needed or wanted to see there." I first heard Lightsey there and, like most Bradley's patrons, I was instantly struck by the lightness of his touch at the piano, the comfort and confidence with which he made each tune his own.

Long before Lightsey showed up at Bradley's, he'd been steeped in another tradition, that of his birthplace. "There is some sort of Detroit pianistic thought wave," Lightsey muses. "It must have been in the water." While it's doubtful that the elegance of players like Tommy Flanagan, Barry Harris, Hank Jones, and Roland Hanna has anything to do with chlorination levels, Lightsey nevertheless taps a deep pool of tradition that extends to younger players like Geri Allen as well.

Goodbye Mr. Evans (Evidence), Lightsey's new and wonderfully impressive trio date with bassist Tibor Elekes and drummer Famoudou Don Moye, owes part of its inspiration to a gig in a setting far removed from Bradley's vibe. As Lightsey recalls, "I had a tour with the trio and a couple of dates were canceled, so we found a hotel gig for two weeks. After the first week, we were fed up with the set-up, and had a horrible taste in our mouths. So we called the rest off, and I decided to go into the studio and do something more positive."

To say the least. While the new CD is a powerful showcase for Lightsey's touch (announced with a gliss at the start of Jimmy Heath's "A New Blue"), it's the trio's interaction that captivates most of all. Lightsey's worked with Elekes many times before, and he and Moye are long-time rhythm-mates in the adventurous

and aptly named group the Leaders. Says Lightsey, "Don draws from many druming mentalities: African, jazz, blues. He knows and feels and believes a broad cross-section of music." Listeners may be more familiar with Moye's far-flung expressions as part of the Art Ensemble of Chicago; his wealth of influences and unfettered approach provide a sublime, yet complicated bed of polyrhythms for Lightsey's pianistic statements. Best of the lot is a medley beginning with "Freedom Jazz Dance" and ending with "Giant Steps." This suite of sorts is clearly built on Moye's ideas,

as much melodic as they are rhythmic, and Lightsey virtually floats above these imperatives.

In terms of pure sound, Elekes' waltz-time adaptation of Chopin's 6th Etude offers the best showcase of all for Lightsey. "It was the hardest thing on the album to play," Lightsey says of the piece. "In Detroit, if it wasn't bebop, played like bebop, it wasn't worth listening to, or so the logic went. Well, it was

the same kind of thing with the Chopin piece. It would have been blasphemy, going against the church, had I not kept the integrity of the melody in mind."

Not to worry: Atop Elekes' gentle arrangement, Lightsey sings the piece in as convincing a fashion as he would a bebop head or a blues refrain — and,



l-r: tibor elekes, kirk lightsey, and famoudou don moye

in so doing, he sets it apart from stereotype. That is to say, he'd more than likely leave classical scholars and Motown beboppers equally satisfied. Also worth a second listen is Lightsey's read of Thelonious Monk's "Four in One." While many players (Lightsey included) can render the tune's overlapping arpeggios with style, Lightsey is among the few who pick out the melody, and play the tune in song-like fashion.