

South African jazz musician Abdullah Ibrahim returns with *The Balance*

By Hiram Lee
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South African composer and pianist Abdullah Ibrahim, formerly known as Dollar Brand, is now in his 84th year. For at least 60 of those years, he has been a jazz musician. With a long and impressive career already behind him, Ibrahim continues to record and perform meaningful work, as the albums *Sotho Blue* (2010), *Mukashi* (2013) and *The Song is My Story* (2014) will attest. His latest work, *The Balance*, is a welcome addition to his catalog.

In 1959, as a member of the Jazz Epistles, Ibrahim, along with trumpeter Hugh Masekela, participated in the first jazz album recorded by South African musicians. From that time on, he became a leading figure in the Cape Jazz scene, a style blending American jazz with South African musical traditions.

Jazz legend Duke Ellington was an early supporter of Ibrahim's work, producing his breakthrough album *Duke Ellington Presents the Dollar Brand Trio* in 1963. During the mid-1970s, Ibrahim's music was closely associated with the anti-apartheid movement. His song "Mannenberg" appeared in 1974 and became an anti-apartheid anthem. It was a tribute to the nonwhite South Africans segregated into the Mannenberg township of Cape Town. Influenced by marabi music, which itself emerged from the townships, "Mannenberg," said Ibrahim in the 1987 documentary *A Brother with Perfect Timing*, captured "the sound of the mood of the people at that time."

Ibrahim's new album *The Balance* was recorded with his septet Ekaya in a single day in London. It finds the composer and performer still able to capture the sounds of people and their times. One doesn't sense in Ibrahim's work the insulated, academic character of so much jazz released today. His music taps into real life, or at least certain aspects of it. It brings to mind places and people, ways of talking and joking around, real

pain and real joy. The listener is always struck by the *aliveness* of an Ibrahim record.

The Balance contains solo piano pieces along with pieces performed by the full Ekaya septet, showcasing Ibrahim's Ellingtonian way with horns. The solo pieces "Tonegawa," "ZB2," and "Devotion" are played with Ibrahim's customary sensitivity. He tends to avoid virtuosic displays in favor of careful attention to melody and form. The real highlights here, however, are the full band recordings.

Jabula, meaning rejoice, is a genuinely happy song. When Ibrahim's horn section plays the jubilant melody that he has written for them, they sound more like a choir of singing voices than a band of instrumentalists. The composer has always had a talent for capturing this spirit in his work. Even his more oppositional music has had this character. The earlier "Mannenberg," for example, was an anti-apartheid anthem but it was neither a sad nor an angry song. It was, instead, life affirming. It was as though the music were pointing to some of the most oppressed layers in South Africa, saying, "Life is with them!" Warmth, spirit, generosity, playfulness, openness ... it was a human sound. It is a sound that, in the end, says Ibrahim's music, proves to be irrepressible. This feeling permeates much of the musician's best work.

Song for Sathima provides even better evidence of Ibrahim's gift for horns. Tenor saxophonist Lance Bryant carries the melody and featured solo like a single human voice alive with feeling, as though it were the most conscious and articulate voice standing up to speak on behalf of the remaining horns, whose mood surrounds him and lifts him up.

Ibrahim prefers to get a warm sound from his horn sections. He avoids anything too slick, bright or brassy. In such bands, one hears the metal in the horns. When

the players in an Ibrahim band play, one hears the breath passing through them. The only brass instrument in Ekaya is the trombone of Andrae Murchison, who is greatly outnumbered by woodwinds. That Ibrahim often favors the underused baritone saxophone, played here by Marshall McDonald, and the frequently maligned “jazz flute,” played here by Cleave Guyton Jr., is also welcome.

Tuang Guru develops over a dancing hi-hat pattern. It is good to hear the rhythm section of Will Terrill on drums and Noah Jackson on bass playing with such driving energy, especially considering the current popularity of laid-back pseudo-hip hop grooves in contemporary jazz. While Terrill and Jackson speed along at bebop tempos, the soloists play slower, longer phrases on top, creating an interesting tension. The performance begins with solos and only at the end does the song’s true melody emerge, with the whole band coming together to resolve the tension.

Occasionally in Ibrahim’s work, one finds oneself wishing that songs such as this album’s title track, tightly woven, well composed and performed, were given more time for soloists to stretch out, for the songs to be broken in by the improvisers. Without this, some of Ibrahim’s songs tend to stand still, to be too neatly contained. Despite this, the melody of *The Balance* is lovely, played in unison by the unusual combination of Adam Glasser’s harmonica and Noah Jackson’s cello, with Ibrahim’s piano repeating bits of the melody in small figures as if he were an echo trailing after them.

Abdullah Ibrahim has given us an album of intelligence and warmth. It stands out as an unusually open and humane collection of songs in a genre which has been lacking in those elements far too much in recent years. Perhaps other jazz players will take note.

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