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The great Miles Davis once said, "The thing to judge in any jazz artist is, does the man project and does he have ideas?" If these are indeed the canonical essentials of a jazz artist at his best, then saxophonist Marcus Strickland is one of today's truest exemplars.

Triumph of the Heavy: Volume 1 & 2 is Strickland's fourth release from his independent Strick Muzik record label, and his seventh as a leader. The music lives up to its title, and Strickland's distinctive artistry is synonymous with its concept. With a professional career that has just passed the ten-year mark, Strickland's influential sound, distinguished body of work, impressive set of credentials and steady acknowledgement from every credible jazz critic since emerging on the scene has earned him a rightful place alongside the very best narrators of modern jazz.



Triumph of the Heavy: Volume 1 & 2 is an excellent summation of not only invention, commanding execution and highly conceptualized music, but of a brotherhood which is translated on the bandstand and transmitted to the audience. Volume 1 features Strickland's quartet of bassist Ben Williams and drummer E.J. Strickland, as well as the more recent addition of newcomer pianist David Bryant. Volume 2 captures Strickland's seasoned trio of Williams and E.J. live at Firehouse 12; a venue which is both a recording studio and performance space, in New Haven, Connecticut. Strickland shows masterful versatility with an unconventional set of original tunes; all but one per disc penned by the gifted composer. This time around, Strickland is less interested in impressing his listeners per se, although he succeeds brilliantly at just that. Intensely, he's focused on engaging both is loyal and new listeners in a personable way, "I just want them to enjoy themselves," says Strickland of his audience. "I don't want them to walk away with their brains hurting. I don't want them walking away with a calculator trying to figure out what happened. I want them to walk away thinking, wow that was a great hang."

Opening track *Lilt* is easily a celebratory theme for that mission victoriously accomplished. Triumph of the Heavy: Volume 1 & 2 is a jubilant and rejoicing outing, intriguingly defying the stigma of intimidation by which jazz music is so often haunted. Strickland's delicate balance of intricacy and familiarity, and tradition without borders or restrictions, offers assimilation to both aficionados and the less acquainted.

Strickland's desire to preach above and beyond the jazz choir is rooted in his affinity toward a multitude of musical styles. Growing up in a household which encouraged the arts, Strickland's musical palette had been vast long before his professional endeavors. This broad creative range, along with his emergence as a singular voice on his instrument, helped Strickland land his first recording deal as a leader with the Fresh Sound label, soon after the Miami native graduated from New York's esteemed New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music; a breeding ground for many who would become today's most relevant figures in jazz.

Strickland recorded At Last and Brotherhood for Fresh Sound, recruiting fellow New School alumni; pianist Robert Glasper, bassist Brandon Owens, and E.J. Strickland, with whom Strickland had previously established a co-led style group. In between launching a career as a recording artist, Strickland was also making his case as one of the finest saxophonists in the world, placing third in the 2002 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Saxophone Competition; one of the most well-respected barometers for the very best emerging talents in jazz.

Strickland's entrepreneurial spirit as well as shifts in the music industry made for the perfect opportunity to explore the business side of music. Strickland started his own record company and released his first album, Twi-Life, for his Strick Muzik label in 2006. The bold double-disc showcased Strickland's acoustic quartet which included Glasper, bassist Vicente Archer, and E.J. Strickland, and introduced his electric band which included guitarist Lage Lund and bassist Brad Jones. Also, it is here that we get a glimpse of Strickland's strong predilection for the trio setting.

Strickland had been soothing his inner urge to play trio a year before, playing often with Vicente Archer and drummer Damion Reid at a local jazz dive in Brooklyn. But a twist of fate caused its documentation and helped provoke its fruition. "I remember, we got to the studio [to record Twi-Life] and Robert was late. So, we were like, ah... we should record a trio tune just to see if we have the right sound levels, and we recorded [Wayne Shorter's] *Oriental Folk Song* and it ended up on the record."

Strickland's passion for trio is birthed out of his love for drums, as he readily confesses that he'd be a drummer if he wasn't a saxophonist. "Marcus grew up in a house of drummers, and it shows," says his twin brother and dynamic

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drummer and composer E.J, who practiced duo with Marcus profusely. "Rhythmically, he is a drummer on the saxophone. Being that he understands the language of the drums, we can go *anywhere* we want to."

Strickland has a covetable list of recording and performing credits, having collaborated with Wynton Marsalis, Tom Harrell, and Dave Douglas, but Strickland's longest and most impressionable working relationships include two of the most influential drummers ever to play the instrument: Roy Haynes and Jeff "Tain" Watts. Strickland was still attending college when jazz master Roy Haynes asked him to join his Fountain of Youth band. Strickland held the tenor spot for five years before joining Watts; a drummer who is without question at least in-part responsible for ushering in this generation of successors.

After Strickland's subsequent and well-received Open Reel Deck release (an ode to the open reel deck stereo system and the soulful music he heard coming from the one his parents owned), he addressed his fondness of the trio full on, establishing a close-knit ensemble which included both Stricklands and bassist Ben Williams; a superb young talent whose lyricism, grit, and incredible vocabulary have garnered overwhelming acclamation.

"The first time I heard Ben, it was on a gig with trumpeter Kenyatta Beasley, who I went to school with," recalls Strickland. "I remember the gig really felt great. It wasn't because of an incredible solo or a particular tune. It wasn't anything in particular, but I remember several times looking back at my brother and when I would look back at him, he would look at Ben and look back at me as if to signal, 'Yeah, this dude can play!' And so I definitely kept him in my mind. And by the time I was ready to do an acoustic record again, that's the first person who I thought of."

The new trio began to gel, playing a variety of shows including a series of performances at Greenwich Village's Jazz Gallery. Just as Strickland was gearing up for his trio to record Idiosyncrasies (the third album for his label in 2009), he was approached to record an album for the Criss Cross label. Perhaps another "as fate would have it" moment, as Strickland discovered musical synergy with the remarkable Brooklyn-bred pianist David Bryant.

"When I got the call from Gerry Teekens at Criss Cross, I was in Guimarães, Portugal with a quintet that I assembled for a two-week residency there, and David Bryant was on piano. I really dug how David was interacting with my music in Guimarães. The first thing that popped in my mind was to do a ballads record. I already had that on my list of recording ideas. I decided to add David to the trio for the record. He's an extremely incredible musician; he's got the sensitivity that I'm looking for."

Strickland recorded Of Song for Criss Cross and Idiosyncrasies within three weeks of each other. The former is a sublime quartet album that shows a scaling back of Strickland's prolific writing for the first time in his recording career, presenting interpretations of a varied set of cover tunes, ranging from Bob Marley to James Brown to Jacques Brel.

Described as "honest and stubborn" by *The New York Times*, the highly regarded Idiosyncrasies put Strickland's trio on the map, displaying an imaginative mixture of covers and originals. "I was really into trying to play repertoire that was relevant to my life," explains Strickland. "Stuff that's nostalgic to me, not people who could be my father." His decisions about the material covered on Idiosyncrasies were also based on the interworking of the trio format, in what Strickland describes as a "strong triangle". Strickland elaborates further, "The tunes had to have enough character rhythmically, so that it would work for trio, because the strength in the trio is rhythm... it is of any music, but I think in trio format it just becomes even more of the central thing that I'm looking for; a strong sound."

Now officially leading two bands, Strickland's demonstration of their distinction as well as their interweaving tells a well-laid story on Triumph of the Heavy: Volume 1 & 2. Strickland also introduces a new set of skills, playing alto saxophone on half of Volume 1. Although alto was his first instrument as a child, once in high school, Strickland dropped the smaller woodwind for the tenor. But it was Kenny Garrett's seminal Triology album which would snatch Strickland's attention toward the alto yet again, and the yearning to reacquaint himself with the instrument persisted for years. "It was the first thing that I said when I got the endorsement with P. Mauriat... I want an alto," recalls Strickland. They said, 'Really? Are you just doing this?' I said 'Give me an alto, I'll play that.' They gave me an alto, and I did. So, I have all three of them now. I just want to develop with all of them. It's not to replace anything; I just want those to be three voices to work with. I like those ranges."

Strickland's alto sounds more like a warm low soprano on parts of *A Temptress' Gait*, a number which grooves so hard despite its odd time signature; moving in and out of hard-swinging sections. "On soprano, the natural tendency

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is to sound like a squeaking duck," Strickland describes. "After fighting that all these years, and finding how to get a warm sound on soprano, when I got the alto it was even easier to get a warm sound and I owned that. It doesn't sound like most alto players, and I think that's a good thing. I wanted that to be my alto sound."

With one of the most delectable soprano sounds since Branford Marsalis, Strickland offers this range to Volume 1's Dawn. A pensive and romantic ballad, this song is highlighted by a gorgeous vamp dialogued between Strickland and Bryant which fades into what feels like a new beginning, rather than an ending.

Triumph of the Heavy: Volume 1 & 2 is uniquely conversational. Strickland credits this dynamic to the trio and the subsequent new approach to writing for quartet which ensued. "The role of the piano is less accompaniment and more interplay, more intricacies in the part, more specific, rhythmically. So yeah, that's basically the new thing I'm going for when writing for harmonic instruments."

Volume 2 captures the spontaneity and fusion of his buzzed-about trio, as they were wrapping up a lengthy tour. "We were very familiar with each other and I had a whole new repertoire of music that wasn't on Idiosyncrasies, and I knew I wanted to record again but I didn't want to do another studio recording with trio. So I saw that we had this Firehouse 12 gig coming up, so I thought that would be the perfect situation."

As a bandleader, Strickland unsurprisingly takes cues from yet another drummer. "There's a quote from Art Blakey that just says, 'Leave the band alone,' Strickland emphasizes, through an abundance of hearty laughter. "He's referring to his leading style. You know, don't tell them how to play! And it's very important. I want everybody to feel good. I want the band especially to feel good so the music can feel good, and the audience can feel good. I want there to be room for a party. So I write like that, I lead like that."

His band concurs. Williams, who is one of Concord Jazz's most recent signings, finds Strickland's band leading style particularly exemplary. "I've learned a lot from Marcus about leading a band," says Williams. "The trust that Marcus has in his band is what I also feel is important when leading my band. He chooses guys that are not only great musicians individually, but that play well together. Like Marcus, I always keep in mind the strengths of the musicians and really try my best to capitalize on them. I also try to make my musical vision clear to my band mates so they know the general direction I'm going in. Playing with him has done wonders for my growth as a musician." E.J. underscores, "Marcus isn't a musician who wants everyone to listen to him. Rather, he is a musician who wants us all to listen to each other."

Strickland's critics are listening, too. Over the last five years, Strickland has held some of the most prestigious positions in the realm of jazz journalism: Rising Star on Tenor Saxophone in *Downbeat's* 2010 Critic's Poll, Rising Star on Soprano Saxophone in *Downbeat's* 2008 Critic's Poll and Best New Artist in *JazzTimes'* 2006 Reader's Poll. For Strickland, the blueprint for triumph is based on one main principle, "As long as you're honest, I think nobody can mess with that. I think that's essential to being an artist... to be yourself. Really expose what's inside of you, try to put that out there in a very creative and beautiful way that people can enjoy. My whole goal is to make enjoyable music with great depth, and touch as many people as I can with it. That's all I want to do."