

David 'Fathead' Newman readily admits that he had no particular theme in mind for *Song for the New Man*, his fifth disc for HighNote Records. Rather, he just wanted a nice variety of bebop, ballads, and new tunes, aimed at delighting both jazz veterans and newcomers alike. "Sometimes, I think a theme is not so much important as the material that's produced," he says from his upstate New York home, just two days after returning from a Caribbean jazz cruise, playing with contemporaries such as Lou Donaldson, Phil Woods, and Bud Shank, and just one day before he leaves to perform in Berlin.

A mixed bag of tunes, however, may be the best possible way to display the immeasurable talents of this multi-reed stylist, who first made a national impression on the music scene, playing with REB legends such as T-Bone Walker, Lowell Fulson, and most notably, Ray Charles, yet cut his teeth on bebop, while growing up in Dallas, Texas. On *Song for the New Man*, Newman offers a multifaceted program that touches on his early bebop aspirations (Charlie Parker's "Visa"), his love for hard bop (Hank Mobley's "This I Dig of You") and his tenure with the recently departed jazz flute pioneer Herbie Mann ("Passing Through"), while also highlighting a couple of his newer compositions ("Fast Lane" and "Lonesome Head"). The disc also highlights his love and mastery at swooning balladry with sumptuous renderings of "Time After Time" and "When I Fall in Love"—both performed elegantly and soulfully in true Fathead fashion.

Joining Newman on this sterling quartet date are drummer Jimmy Cobb and trombonist Curtis Fuller,

two luminaries, who share both his effortless sense of swing and emotional directness. Cobb's sparkling cymbal rides and sleek drumming swings comfortably alongside Newman's longtime bassist, John Menegon, who firmly propels the music forward with sturdy, fluid rhythms and counter-melodies. Fuller shares frontline duties with Newman on six songs, offering a tantalizing contrast to Fathead's smooth, butterscotch tone with his sometimes bristly textures. The extremely versatile and vastly underrated HighNote Records' house pianist, John Hicks completes the quintet, displaying his keen mastery at instilling his accompaniments with just the right amount of rhythmic verve and laidback grace.

At the ripe age of 70, Newman still hones a brawny, robust tone that's splendidly enlivened by his nimble, dance-like phrasing. When he plays, he never loses sight of the melody even during a song's most prickly sequences, making every phrase utterly singable. Like his blustery, wide-open sound, his improvisational emphasis on the melody is a testament to his Southern blues roots, proudly extending the legacy of the Texas Tenors, which include such illustrious stylists as Hershel Evans, Buddy Tate, Arnett Cobb, Illinois Jacquet, and Buster Smith.

"Buster was my main influence on the alto," Newman says. "He was from Dallas and lived in Kansas City for a long time, playing with the Beppny Moten band and the Blue Devils Band. Charlie Parker listened to Buster also when he lived in Kansas City, playing with the Jay McShann group. But coming from Texas, I was sur-

rounded by the blues; you couldn't help but play the blues if you wanted to make a living there."

That barrelhouse Texas blues that Newman speaks of admirably fuels his rendition of Parker's late '40s composition, "Visa." Newman crisply articulates the song's zigzagging melody, but instead of churning it out at the quicksilver pace most commonly associated with the tune, he uncoils it leisurely almost as if it was a shuffling blues ballad. Fuller follows up with a more aggressive, brassier solo, playing and tussling with the intricate melody and sometimes sounding like a ferocious tiger before he passes it on to Menegon, who animates it with an easy, joyful bounce. Hicks caps off the Bird chestnut with a concise, blues-laden solo, filled with regally articulated notes.

The seasoned relaxation and joyful camaraderie displayed on "Visa" sets the pace for *Song for the New Man*, whether it's the exuberant calypso jaunt of Mitchell's "Shakabu" or the spry waltz on the titled track, which features Newman's dexterity on flute. Perhaps, it's the two romantic ballads—"Time After Time" and "When I Fall in Love"—that best capture Newman's luminous tenor. On both, he tugs gently yet ever so effectively on the heartstrings as he scoops up the melodies and caresses them lovingly against the amorous settings afforded by the rhythm section.

Newman's most absorbing performance here, however, is the melancholy "Passing Through," his loving tribute to his recently departed friend, Herbie Mann, who passed away on July 1, 2003. The song first appeared

on Mann's 2000 *Eastern European Roots* (Lightyear) as a tribute to his mother-in-law, after a trip to Romania. But here, Newman transforms the beautiful melody into a misty yearn, beautifully underscored by Hicks' bluesy, empathic accompaniment and Cobb's measured cymbal work. "We were very close," Newman says of Mann. "Herbie was a very good businessman. I learned so many things about the business from him; and musically also. He was a fine gentleman and a fine musician. And he was always very fair and good to his musicians, more so than probably any leader that I've ever played with as a sideman."

*Song for the New Man* also showcases two newer compositions in Newman's songbook—the burning, "Fast Lane" which finds him and Fuller exuberantly racing past each other with the solos much like vehicles on a freeway; and the groove-laden, "Lonesome Head" first recorded by Winard Harper on his 1994 solo debut, *Be Yourself* (Epicure), but now making its entry point in Fathead's discography. Again, both blues-drenched tunes illustrate Newman's undisputed soulfulness, musicality and versatility, while superbly complementing this attractive, ingeniously no frills album.

— John Murph

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