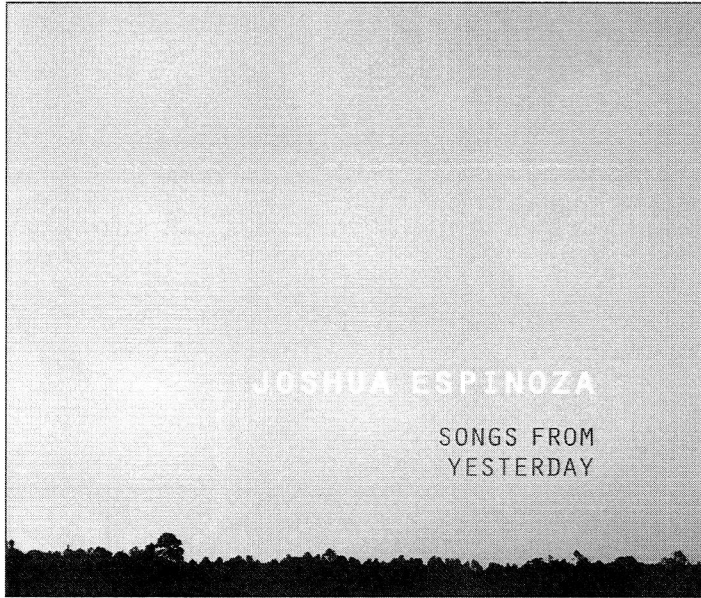


Joshua Espinoza's New Album: *Songs From Yesterday*



By Michael B. Friedman

Joshua Espinoza's second album (Joshua Espinoza, piano; Kris Monson, double bass; Jaron Lamar Davis, drums) demonstrates once again that he is a remarkably original and creative musician.

What I find most striking about his playing is that unlike too many young jazz musicians, he is not devoted to playing fast and loud. His playing tends to be slow, gentle, and thoughtful. Whether he is elaborating on his own compositions or on Beatles, Billy Joel or Leonard Cohen songs, he takes the time to explore their harmonies and rhythms and to discover surprising possibilities hidden within them.

I am also struck by his willingness to subjugate his technique to the music rather than to show off his chops. Too many young players, in my opinion, seem to use the music as an opportunity to put their technique on display and in the process lose the music. Not Espinoza. For him the music is always first.

The music on this album has a nostalgic feel to it. No accident. The liner notes say, "The seeds of the album were planted in the early days of the pandemic, a time that invited Espinoza to reflect on his life, his complicated childhood, and his earliest musical memories."

In a note to me, Espinoza added, "The songs on this album were important to me growing up. My goal is to interpret them in a way that is true to the originals as conceived by the songwriters, but of course to add my own personal approach/aesthetic to them. The original compositions ["Adrift," "Appalachian Wanderer," "Michoacán," "Don't Fan the Flame"] are inspired by either important experiences from my life or inspired by important people. 'Appalachian Wanderer' is dedicated to my mom, who grew up in rural Southwest Virginia, and 'Michoacán' is dedicated to my dad and his stories about his home state of Michoacán in Mexico."

The emotional importance of his work is clear.

In addition to its personal emotional roots, Espinoza's music has clear roots in a broad range of music: jazz, of course, but also classical impressionism (think Debussy, Ravel, and Stravinsky). Also country music, and folk and popular music. It is all brought together in a style that is uniquely Espinoza.

The harmonic variations that Espinoza uses always surprise me. They are clearest on songs written by other people—the Beatles tunes, the Billy Joel and Leonard Cohen tunes, "The A Train" on his previous album. He finds harmonic possibilities that I find compelling, though I confess I don't understand what they are. He clearly is not afraid of dissonance, which he sometimes uses with powerful effect. And he told me that he avoids stacking chords composed of thirds, instead using 2nds and 9ths and the pentatonic scale. Whatever the theory, the harmonic outcome is unique.

Espinoza's trio is also quite remarkable as an ensemble. There are a couple of tracks on this album when they sound like a good piano jazz trio, really together. But mostly they sound more like a chamber group in which the bass and drums are not backup to the piano but co-equal instruments in creating the overall sound. Amazing.



Jaron Lamar Davis, Joshua Espinoza, Kris Monson

Although this is a review of his new album, I want to mention that Espinoza and his trio are terrific live performers. They are a great example of group improvisation at its best, when the players seem to be able to read each other's minds or to become a single musical mind. If you can find one, go to a live performance. The album release concert happens Monday, October 2nd at Blues Alley. In November, he'll be on tour in Tennessee and Pennsylvania.

So, I recommend this album as a novel musical experience. And I hope that there will soon be a third album. Personally, I'd like to hear Espinoza's interpretations of some more of the jazz classics. If anyone can find new harmonic and rhythmic possibilities for the standards, it's him.

The album release date is September 29, 2023. It can be accessed on Espinoza's website, joshuaespinoza.com