

# VARIATIONS IN BLUE

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## Jan Harbeck Quartet feat. Walter Smith III

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**Stunt Records**



Stunt Records CD & LP

STUCD 14112



STULP 14111



For 39 year-old Jan Harbeck's third release for Stunt Records, the Danish tenor saxophonist chose a selection of classic standards combined with a couple of new original tunes to create an integrated atmosphere – a mood record with its own special intensity and presence. He spent three years finding the exact right tunes and wound up with compositions of melodic simplicity that leave space for the interpreter to dig into the basic core of the music without forfeiting dramatic aspects.

Back in 1967 tenor saxophonists Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis and Paul Gonsalves recorded a now almost forgotten LP called LOVE CALLS. The warm and unpretentious approach on that album was an inspiration in the making of VARIATIONS IN BLUE. As on the Davis/Gonsalves LP, VARIATIONS IN BLUE features none of the two-part horn arrangements, unison passages or lightning tenor battles, which are so common when sax colleagues record together. Jan Harbeck and Walther Smith III take turns presenting themes – one interprets the A-part leaving the B-part to the other, and the solos are often intertwined creating one sound – two saxophones “making love”. Another – perhaps more surprising - inspiration for the album was Bach's Goldberg Variations: on András Schiff's 1982 recording for Decca, the piano great creates one long mood development throughout the hour-long duration of the work. It was Jan Harbeck's intention to give VARIATIONS IN BLUE a similar presence and warmth with nuances and variations weaving a blue thread through the album.

To bring these ideas to life – two tenors plus rhythm section in close interplay with reflections and echoes – it was important to find the right tenor saxophonist to share the front, and with his personal, warm, subdued but also extremely effective and modern approach to his instrument, Walter Smith III was the perfect choice. New York Times has described this shooting star as “fabulous”. While leading his own groups, he is also a member of trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire's band. Jan Harbeck swears by the great tradition of the swing era but renews it with his own original touch. He is more than a big-toned, old school swing tenor.

The two tenors work beautifully together. With respect for the history and material, they have created a soulful remake of the classic jazz sound.

However, VARIATIONS IN BLUE is not merely a tribute to jazz of old, it bridges inspirations from earlier to modern jazz. Only two mature musical personas with mutual respect can make time stand still tenderly and lead the past into the future in such a natural way. Their musicianship is unpretentious and supple, and above all full of love.

Henrik Gunde on piano, Eske Nørrelykke on bass and Anders Holm on drums, have been the regular rhythm section in Jan Harbeck's popular quartet for years. Their first album, IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT, received a Danish Grammy for Best Jazz Release. The album and its successor COPEHAGEN NOCTURNE are among the best selling Danish jazz albums in recent years, and the quartet is a popular Danish live attraction, touring extensively here and across Europe. On stage, the Jan Harbeck Quartet prefers to play unamplified whenever possible. To sustain the intimate atmosphere from their many concerts, the music on VARIATIONS IN BLUE was recorded in the same room without separation between the instruments. When presence and a natural sound are given top priority, one must forego the option of subsequent editing. On VARIATIONS IN BLUE nothing has been cut out or corrected. If your sound system is adjusted correctly, Jan Harbeck should be in the right channel and Walter Smith III in the left.

Jan Harbeck (to Jazz Special):

“LOVE CALLS is a wonderful record with “Lockjaw” Davis and Paul Gonsalves playing standards quietly and smoothly. They take turns playing. I associated Walter with that sound – and I really love his sound – so it was natural to ask him... and it worked perfectly!”

Walter Smith III (to Jazz Special):

“Actually, I never really get a chance to play standards like the ones Jan suggested. They aren't part of my professional career, which almost exclusively involves original and alternative music. So it was interesting for me to accept the offer. Jan has interesting ideas, and he plays beautifully. He has a good, easy sound... his sound is really cool. The material was a challenge. I had to listen to how other musicians play the tunes before playing them myself. But they were all cool.”

*Jan Harbeck, Walter Smith III (ts), Henrik Gunde (p), Eske Nørrelykke (b), Anders Holm (d).*

*East St. Louis Toodle-Oo / Nordic Echoes / Don't Let the Sun Catch You Cryin' / Third time to Tango / Black and Tan Fantasy / Oblivion / Salvation / Blues in the Night / May Each Day.*

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