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Jazz

**James "The Bonge" Bongiorno *Prelude*
 Bonge Records BRCD 10001-2**

MORE THAN A FEW years ago, when working in NYC and enjoying an apartment in Greenwich Village, I would make the rounds of the many local jazz clubs in the late evenings. Among what must be hundreds of such visits, I fondly remember many fine jazz pianists and memorable clubs, including Mary Lou Williams at The Cookery, Barry Harris at Bradley's, Lance Hayward at the Village Corner, and many more players at Knickerbockers, one of the few survivors. All of those pianists had fine chops; they couldn't hold jobs in such competitive places otherwise.

On *Prelude*, James Bongiorno's first recording, we meet a piano player who could well have been delighting the crowd at Knickerbocker's or another of those clubs. While newly recorded, Mr. Bongiorno is a long time player, and, of great interest to us audiophiles, he is also an audio equipment designer and engineer of high repute. He is known for his work on the famous Dynaco Stereo 400 amplifier (I built the kit version of the 400's little brother, the Stereo 150, during those Village years). He did design work for Morris Kessler of SAE, Great American Sound, and Ampzilla, as well as being a principal of the latter pair. His current (no pun!) amp is the Ampzilla2000, a product of his firm, Spread Spectrum Technologies (www.ampzilla2000.com, which includes means to buy this CD). So, let's see what a long-time player and long-time audio designer and expert does with a piano and jazz.

In the liner notes, Mr. Bongiorno names Oscar Peterson, Art Tatum and Bill Evans as his major influences, and the tunes selected and piano styling on this recording do pay tribute to that legacy. Mr. B. reveals in those notes that he started on accordion, but I heard no

obvious evidence of such *déclassé* influences – no "Lady of Spain" quotes. He is playing solo, without the rhythmic support of bass and drums as in Peterson's or Evan's trios, and much of the music is played at mid-tempo, in a sometimes reflective manner, with a varying tempo. He uses the full range of the studio's Yamaha Grand, both in terms of working the whole keyboard and in terms of wide dynamic range.

Listening to him play on my system, I found myself sitting before someone who obviously loves jazz standards, the legacy of those older players, is aware of those traditions and techniques, and loves all the full, rich jazz sounds that a well-played piano can produce. Mr. B. is obviously well endowed with chops, as evidenced in the careful attention to melodic line, layered up with inventive harmonic shifts, like Peterson or Evans, and much filigree, a la Tatum. I felt that he was earnestly trying to communicate the beauty of each song and to display the many enriching possibilities it presented to him. He reached me; I would happily go to Knickerbockers to hear this jazz piano player stretch out on standards.

To my ears, the best tunes were "Waltz for Debbie," "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning," "It Might as Well Be Spring," and a well-written original from The Bonge, "I Loved You So." These tunes held closest to the melodic line and sang best, to me.

As might be expected from this audio expert, the sound on this recording is full-range, warm and clear, with a fairly close-up studio perspective. *Prelude* is recommended, particularly for lovers of the great jazz standards and of the great artists of the jazz piano I've named above.