

James Bongiorno



THE BONGE — **Bonge Records** #BRCD 10001-2. *Waltz for Debbie, When Lights Are Low, My Funny Valentine, Gone with the Wind, Here's That Rainy Day, Have You Met Miss Jones, I Loved You So, On a Clear Day, Little Girl Blue, Since You Went Away, Young at Heart, In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning, It Might as Well Be Spring, Just Friends.*

PERSONNEL: James Bongiorno, piano.

By Bill Donaldson

James Bongiorno was an audio circuit designer, who wanted to be an accordionist, who wanted to be a jazz piano player. Now that Bongiorno has released the first CD of his work on piano, he has become all three, although he did play piano during select occasions in the past. As producer John Novello explains in the liner notes, Bongiorno (or the Bonge, for short) used to perform on piano in the 1960's, when they were friends in Erie, Pennsylvania. A lot has happened since then. Events, however, have converged to bring the Bonge and Novello together in a project that both wish would have happened years ago. The important thing is, however, that it has happened now.

The Bonge, it turns out, has strong opinions about jazz piano heavyweights, and his influences range from Bill Evans to Oscar Peterson to Art Tatum. You can hear a little bit of all of those pianists in the Bonge's playing. "Waltz for Debby" is performed in the manner of "Waltz-for-Debby"-if-Tatum-had-played-it. The Bonge adopts Evans' rhythmic looseness, carrying phrases over the bar lines, as well as his broad, spare chords. However, he also glides into some stride as well, the resulting mixture a tribute to pianists with strength of style and originality of thought. Still, choosing to record a solo album reveals his own choices despite the obvious influences of his predecessors and peers. In doing so, he creates a musical amalgam that establishes his own signature. Not employing the light, scampering touch of an accordionist, who has only to press the keys to squeeze out notes, The Bonge plays piano with great force, as if he were unable to restrain his enthusiasm for the instrument while he performs. Like Erroll Garner, for instance, the Bonge shows delicacy by interrupting swing with fluttering arpeggios and hesitant pauses, though the dynamics of his sound remain within a narrow range.

Still, as a single performer, The Bonge knows how to command a listener's attention as he glides from metrically free sections of rumination to the irrepressibility of his swing. On "Have You Met Miss Jones," The Bonge obviously has borrowed some ideas from Peterson as he descends in waterfalls from the top of the keyboard to its very bottom as an embellishment to its introduction before moving into the stride section. "Young at Heart" could be interesting in the hands of The Bonge, for one wouldn't know what means of interpretation he would select, the tune itself being eminently adaptable. Restraining his affinity for stomping bass, The Bonge goes for Evans-like re-harmonizations as he unhurriedly defies expectations. "Just Friends" becomes the track powered by The Bonge's strong left hand, as he accelerates and then decelerates in an elastic display of technical ferocity.

Recorded in a single session of first takes, James Bongiorno's premier album represents a long delayed project that was recorded so efficiently and so quickly that one wonders why he and his friend Novello didn't do it years ago. But now it's done, and the Bonge no longer remains unheard by listeners interested in traditional jazz piano playing assertively stated.