

***NATURAL DIVERSION* LINER NOTES**

by Scott Yanow

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Best known for leading a series of impressive trios in the Midwest, pianist Travis Wesley felt that it was long overdue for his current group to be documented. While he has recorded previously, including such CDs as *Standard Interpretations* (duets with bassist Ben Wheeler), a set with singer Ron Jones (*The More I See You*), and an outing that featured Travis on the Fender Rhodes electric piano (*Sections*), the pianist rightfully feels that *Natural Diversion* is his most mature statement to date.

On *Natural Diversion*, Travis teams up with bassist Matt Hughes and drummer Tom Marko. "I have worked with Tom for a few years and he has long been the main drummer in my trio. He is very supportive, swings hard, and makes the music feel good. I've only known Matt Hughes for a year and a half. He comes from New York and recorded on Betty Carter's last album. I love his playing, he gets a full sound, and he has solid time. Both of those guys are not only very good players but are fulltime professors. Tom is the professor of jazz studies at Illinois State University while Matt, in addition to being a teaching assistant at the University of Illinois, is a professor of jazz bass at Western Illinois University." It should be added that Travis is also an educator, working as a teaching assistant at the University of Illinois and teaching jazz, blues and rock n' roll history at Heartland Community College in Normal, IL.

However one does not need a music degree to appreciate and enjoy the accessible and swinging music that the Travis Wesley Trio performs on *Natural Diversion*. The trio has developed its own musical personality out of the tradition of 1950s and '60s hard bop. At various times, Travis' playing recalls such piano greats as Red Garland, Wynton Kelly, Erroll Garner and Ahmad Jamal while also speaking in his own creative voice. Matt Hughes and Tom Marko are supportive, swinging and tasteful yet just unpredictable enough to push the pianist to play at his best. In addition, Matt's occasional bowed solos display both his classical training and his intuitive jazz skills.

This CD begins with the title cut, a blues with a bridge composed by Travis specifically for the project. The chord voicings recall McCoy Tyner a bit while the pianist's solo flight sounds quite original. The piece has an appealing forward momentum that enthusiastically launches this recording.

Otherwise, all of the songs other than the final selection are veteran jazz standards that are given original arrangements. "Teach Me Tonight" finds the trio engaging in close interplay at a slow-medium tempo and making dramatic use of space. Matt's bass lines are quite stimulating behind Travis' relaxed solo.

Travis caresses the melody during a very restrained rendition of "I've Grown Accustomed To Her Face," setting a warm mood that is continued by Matt during his brief bowed statement. The pianist's composed introduction sets a somber mood for "Emily" before the trio cooks the Johnny Mandel classic in a medium-tempo version that is full of life and joy. "My Shining Hour" also has a thoughtful solo piano introduction before the most extended playing of the set. After the melody chorus, Travis plays five choruses full of inventive ideas that always keep the melody in mind. Matt takes a couple of fine bass choruses before a fiery piano-drums tradeoff and a cooking vamp bring this memorable performance to a close.

"I wanted to have one song that was quite a bit different. Paul Simon has written several songs that are becoming standards. I put an original spin on one of my favorite songs of his." Travis' version of the lyrical ballad "Slip Slidin' Away" turns the folk song into modern jazz.

The always beautiful theme of "What Are You Doing For The Rest of Your Life?" is given an opportunity to speak for itself with Travis really inhabiting the melody at a slow tempo.

"Billy Boy," a traditional and familiar melody, was reinvented on a classic recording by the trio of pianist Red Garland, bassist Paul Chambers and drummer Philly Joe Jones on Miles Davis' *Milestones* album back in 1958. Travis studied and brought back the original arrangement which he says "is actually harder than it sounds but worth it." The infectious swing of this new version, which has fresh solos by all three musicians, is irresistible and serves as a perfect closer for *Natural Diversion*.

Travis Wesley, in addition to his regular work with his trio and his teaching is currently in the last semester

of earning his doctorate in music at University of Illinois. On the basis of his fine playing throughout Natural Diversion, not only does he have a lot of knowledge to share with students but he clearly has a great future as a jazz pianist.

Scott Yanow, author of ten books including *The Jazz Singers*, *Trumpet Kings*, *Jazz On Film*, *Jazz On Record 1917-76* & Recently, *The Great Jazz Guitarists: The Ultimate Guide*.