



Michael Blake
The World Awakes - A Tribute to Eli "Lucky" Thompson
(Stunt Records, STUCD 07092)

"Saxophonist Lucky Thompson was almost naive, extremely honest, in his music – and this goes for his compositions as well. He was very advanced rhythmically. He came out of the swing era, but in the '50s his playing was influenced by bebop, and later still he almost went modal. And the records he made in the early '70s show that even then he was still interested in what was new."

The above is a condensed version of Canadian born New Yorker, saxophonist Michael Blake's admiring assessment of the legendary Thompson, who died in 2005. His words also become the motivation for his latest release THE WORLD AWAKES – A TRIBUTE TO ELI "LUCKY" THOMPSON.

42-year old Michael Blake has always involved himself in diverse projects, from his years with the Lounge Lizards, through his free music groups in New York, his film and theater scores and recent years' acclaimed CDs with Blake Tatars. In other words Blake is versatile, and one of those jazz musicians who explores and seeks inspiration within the tradition, while at the same time expanding its borderlines.

Michael Blake first heard Lucky Thompson on Charlie Parker's Los Angeles recordings from the '40s. At the time Lucky was in his 20s, but already had his own sound, and his tenor solos were complex and unpredictable. It was well known that Lucky kept to himself, and that he fought depressive spells. After turning his back on music, he lived on his own in the woods. However, his music seems so tranquil, thoughtful and full of love, that it is difficult to imagine him as anything other than an active jazz musician, ready to share his talent with the world. In real life he sold his horns to a dentist in the 1970s.

Lucky Thompson's songs own an innocent optimism, which hardly fits in with his disturbed personality, but nevertheless attracted Michael Blake's interest. Thompson is not necessarily Blake's biggest hero; he is one of many. But there are two outsiders who mean a lot to Michael Blake. One is Roland Kirk; like Kirk, Blake likes to play several horns simultaneously. The other is Lucky Thompson.

How could such a great artist give in to his own bitterness and give up music? It is obvious that he had mental problems. Perhaps the pharmaceutical industry could not cure him. Maybe Lucky despised the music industry to such a degree, that it drove him to an inescapable depression. It is a sad thought that neither the musicians who loved him

nor the unimaginative business of jazz music were able to give Eli Lucky Thompson another shot at gaining the respect and honor he deserves. Now Michael Blake has chosen to pay tribute to this master, perform his compositions and win people over to his music. We are certain that wherever he may be, Lucky will appreciate being remembered.

This laudable project – a musical tribute to tenor and soprano legend Lucky Thompson – has been carried out with originality and loyalty. The participating soloists are allowed space to express themselves in their own personal idioms – idioms created long after Lucky Thompson left the jazz scene in the '70s – while still leaving a lasting impression of Lucky Thompson as the important composer that he truly was.

Magically, Blake captures all of this in his arrangements and demonstrates the prowess of his own playing; not least on the soprano sax, which became a fully accepted jazz instrument via Lucky Thompson's intricate but sadly overlooked work. However, merely performing Thompson's music did not suffice for Blake. Once he started this project, he realized that he wanted to supplement Lucky's most memorable tunes with some of his own compositions. This was not to become a "cover record". The tunes include straight ahead jazz, as well as more complex or funky music.

Michael Blake has worked with Thompson's music on a workshop basis for several years. His Danish contacts and the collaboration between Stunt Records and Radio Denmark with producer Ib Skovgaard, have made it possible to create this studio recording. At the core of the project we find Blake himself, pianist Søren Kjærgaard, bassist Jonas Westergaard and drummer Kresten Osgood. These same musicians make up Michael Blake's popular European group, Blake Tatars. The regular line up is supplemented by guest musicians, including a violinist and cellist, who in Blake's intelligent arrangements add new facets to Thompson's music. This recording cements Lucky Thompson's position as a musician who developed from swing to bop while also revealing his originality and mastery. At the same time it strengthens Michael Blake's reputation as an extraordinary artist.

The story of Lucky Thompson's life and abrupt departure from music, and his subsequent life as a hobo, is a story that kindles jazz myths. The comprehensive cover notes and historical and recent photographic material amply uncover this myth. Torben Ulrich tells the story of a psychiatrist working on a Thompson discography, who – via long-term detective work – upon finding the subject of his research in some god-forsaken spot in the Midwest, was rejected with the words, "Please, remove your self from my presence..."

Michael Blake's CD takes us very close to Thompson's presence, but we need not fear being rejected. To the contrary.

Michael Blake tenor and soprano saxophone, clarinet
Søren Kjærgaard piano, Rhodes, electronics
Jonas Westergaard bass
Kresten Osgood drums
+
Peter Fuglsang bass clarinet and clarinet
Kasper Tranberg trumpet
Lars Bjørnkjær violin
Henrik Dam Thomsen cello
Teddy Kumpel guitars
Rob Jost french horn

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Engineered by Lars Palsig, Produced by Ib Skovgaard

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