

Michael “Patches” Stewart – On-Fire

Musing on the concept of fire as it might pertain to New Orleans-born brass man Michael “Patches” Stewart, the mind flashes on a freshly Afro’d Hendrix flanked by white Englishmen on a psychedelic 45...20+ minutes of “Lonely Fire” pouring like liquid hypnotism from Miles’ cobalt horn...Sugarfoot barkin’ up a horn dog storm at a “Funk Fest”...or a CTI sampler LP of orchestral jazz-rock fusion that invites you to “Fire into Music.” Brother Stewart has inhaled all this and more in passionate and purposeful musical sojourns that have taken him around the world. His image is clear...cool detachment with much dap in his sense of style...dark shades on his nose...silky Black Indian “good hair” catchin’ the white hot spotlight...the bell of his horn aimed squarely at the floor in blue reverence. Most recently, Patches dropped anchor in Warsaw, Poland where he kicked it a couple years, making friends with local cats that inspired him to embark upon a whim of contemporary cultural exchange. You’re holding the result...a tight lil’ slow-smoked 8-song tenderloin he dubs *On Fire*.

Patches made his professional debut at 16 on LaBelle’s Allen Toussaint-produced classic “Lady Marmalade” in 1974 then grabbed the attention of the great Quincy Jones who took him on tour behind his *The Dude* LP in the early ’80s. This was followed by sessions ranging from The Brothers Johnson and Stanley Turrentine to Whitney Houston and Brenda Russell. Patches’ first recordings as a leader were for the Hip Bop label: *Blue Patches* (1997) and *Penetration* (1998). He is most vividly recalled for the 8 years he spent on the road with Al Jarreau, replacing studio legend Jerry Hey (beautifully represented on the intimate 1994 live set *Tenderness*) followed by 16 years in the cutting edge band of bass chameleon Marcus Miller - an 11th hour replacement for Tom Browne. “As a band leader, Marcus gave me a lot of freedom of expression and was open to new ideas,” Patches states. “Deepest of all, I never knew what to expect night after night on the bandstand.” Miller was heavily instrumental in the making of Patches’ third CD, *Blow* (2005).

On Fire represents a different point of departure. “I have a really nice fan base in Europe,” he explains. “People know me more there than in the U.S. I work with bands in Germany, Slovakia, Russia and Belarus. Since I’ve been in Poland, I hooked up with saxophonist Henryk Miśkiewicz as a guest in his band Full Drive with Robert Kubiszyn (composer/multi-instrumentalist). That gave me the idea to do a CD with Polish and American musicians - uniting two musical worlds and blurring the lines - *without boundaries*.” Patches’ new music is hiply engaging, aurally warm and eminently listenable. Kubiszyn composed half of the songs, the other half stemmed from American musicians including one co-written by Patches.

The album is titled *On Fire* because everything from the writing to the recording sessions was accomplished under fire...under time-pressed circumstances where passion met fleeting opportunity...grabbing primo studio time as available...even *ambushing* Kenny Garrett at the airport for a quick session when he by chance came to Europe for a concert. This all gave the music a sense of urgency.

The CD opens with the fluttering title track “**On Fire.**” Right off the bat, Patches dashes expectations by starting out on Flugelhorn, followed by a great solo entrance from Kenny Garrett on alto then a deceptively tempo-shifting drum solo from Pogie Bell over some Wah Wah guitar voodoo. The band engages in much the same vein two cuts in on “**PatcheSteps.**” Is that a second drum solo we hear on one CD?! No surprise as the explosive Pogie is Patches’ longtime friend from the Miller band. Patches and Garrett - another friend with whom he recorded on the now classic song/CD *Happy People* (2002) – wax like Freddie Hubbard and Hank Crawford on an aforementioned CTI date. Both songs were penned especially for Patches by Kubiszyn who states, “We are completely compatible. Patches puts so much heart, spirit and good energy into every note. I love writing for him.”

“**Shibuya Drive,**” inspired by the crazy energy of the bustling car and pedestrian traffic of the Tokyo city, gives listeners a taste of how Patches on muted trumpet and Henryk on sax sound together with Full Drive in concert. They’ve already recorded one “Live” project, *Full Drive 3*. This tune puts one in the mind of something Miles might have cut if he’d reunited with guitarist John Scofield.

But Kubiszyn’s shining compositional moment is “**Northern Star,**” a song that rained down on him as he stepped outside for a cigarette break. A composer and recording artist (*Before Sunrise*) who counts Vince Mendoza, Herbie Hancock and Gonzalo Rubalcaba as influential, Kubiszyn describes the folky flow of “Northern Star” as, “soul Slavic nostalgia. I remember working on it for two hours before my computer crashed! But the song was so strong in my head I had no problem bringing it all back. Patches’ sound has so much space and air here...” Conjuring more magic on Fender Rhodes and Moog synthesizer is George Duke whom Patches has known since the mid-’80s, playing on five of his CDs including his latest, *Dreamweaver*. “George’s playing is amazing on ‘Northern Star,’” Patches marvels. “He doesn’t even sound like himself until the synth stuff at the end...”

“**Feeling Good**” is a tune that Pogie sent Patches 10 years ago from the pen of Phil Davis, a keyboardist out of Atlanta. Patches put a melody to the basic track and guitarist Paul Jackson Jr. rides its wave like smooth sailing. Davis’ self-penned “**Rainy Night**” puts the evocative effect of Patches on muted trumpet to full effect over a transfixing set of chords on Rhodes as rendered by Paweł Tomaszewski. And the influence of Marcus Miller is undeniably felt in Kubiszyn’s bass playing twinned with bass clarinet on “**New Jazz Groove**” from the pen of

Cleveland-based keyboardist Nick Smith, an alumnus of The Stanley Clarke Band. The song is filled with delicious hand-offs between the players within the composition, particularly Kubiszyn also on guitar here.

The one vocal on *On Fire* is the moving “**Child in Me**” written by Donald Blackman, the mercurial keyboardist, composer and singer who sadly passed away this year. Another friend Patches met during Blackman’s 1-year stint in Miller’s band, the man also sang on *Blow*. “Two years ago Don said, ‘Let me send you something I think you may like.’ It’s a simple lyric but conveys such a personal message. *‘I wanna lay down by your side and learn to love the child in me...’* It reminds me of the old days of songs from my era by Gladys Knight and The O’Jays – lyrics with meaning and feeling My girlfriend Malgorzata turned to me on a cruise and said, ‘What about Raul Midón (of ‘State of Mind’ and ‘All the Answers’ fame) to sing it?’ We reached out and he agreed, painstakingly recording his vocals in his home studio. I love the way he sounds on it. Two months before Donald passed I promised to send him the song but we didn’t complete it before he died last April.”

Europe and particularly Poland have proven eye-opening adventures for Patches. “The culture is very rich. I spent time sightseeing, studying languages and history. I also taught workshops and master classes for music.” While Patches looks forward to performing more with his European compadres in other parts of the world, he is planning to move back to America soon to be closer to his family: his daughter, his sister and brother, and his 98 year-old mother Martha. It will also make it easier to pursue the broad swath of his work – from playing on TV’s popular “American Idol” to studio sessions with the Earth Wind & Fire horns.

A word of warning: should you ever know in advance that you’ll be encountering ol’ Patches, *what-some-ever* you do, pack yourself a lil’ battery-operated fan... `cuz some heat is surely `bout to follow.

- A. Scott Galloway