

# jazzwise

## Album Interview

### Ian Shaw & Tony Kofi

An Adventurous Dream  
- The Music Of Billy Strayhorn And Duke Ellington (At Pizza Express Live in London)

PX Records PXRCD1010 (CD, 2 LP, DL) ★★★★★

Ian Shaw (v), Tony Kofi (as), Barry Green (p) and Dave Green (b). Rec. date not stated



It's fascinating to compare this powerful collaboration, and it is a real double header with Kofi and Shaw sharing credits, with Dave Douglas' *Gifts*. Douglas likewise visits Ellington material with a special focus on Strayhorn songs. But he consciously eschews saxophone on the Strayhorn material. In contrast, Kofi and Shaw celebrate the vibrant relationship between Johnny Hodges' alto, Strayhorn's material and the elusive magus who brought them together, Duke Ellington.

Kofi is an assured evolist: his *Another Kind of Soul* was a brilliant evocation of altoist Cannonball Adderley while his immersion in Strayhorn goes back to 2010 and *Strayhorn the Songwriter* with Alex Webb. As well as singing along with Shaw ('it is like having two singers on stage' notes Ian) whether on an ebullient 'Mood Indigo' or merging deliciously into Barry Green's to die for piano intro to 'Day Dream', Kofi also has two solo features of his own.

On 'Isfahan' Kofi's sensual edge stills the clatter of knife on china that is implicit to a live at the Pizza Express recording. As for 'Blood Count', a composition too deep for tears that even Shaw is rendered silent by, Kofi's sense of loss is countered by his urgent will to live. **Andy Robson**

### Andy Robson spoke to Ian Shaw about the new album

#### *This is a stunning partnership with Tony Kofi...*

Tony is extraordinary. He's always had that vocal technique which Johnny Hodges had, that sliding up of the note, that ear teasing thing.

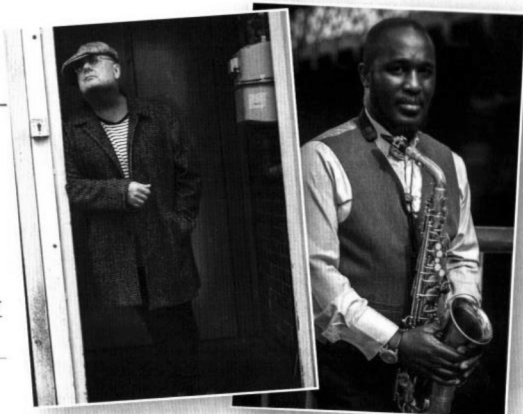
I love Iain Ballamy (a long time Shaw collaborator in his trio and the current *Greek Street Friday* band) but I don't feel that with Iain. That's a very different discourse.

#### *And a live release?*

It's that 'beautiful passing moment that can never be repeated' vibe. I'm sure you're bolder as a player when you're out of the studio, in front of a crowd, and you may have shared a joke and a drink beforehand.

#### *You're a fantastic storyteller, but there's none of the vibrant intros you usually do?*

And there are such stories to tell. Like when Strayhorn goes cruising and ends up on a building site and his ring gets lost, matron, in a sand pit. And Lena Horne goes back and finds the ring while Strayhorn's in hospital having been beaten black and blue for being black and gay.



**Most of these songs were written in the late 1930s/40s when Nazis, and others, were exterminating those they considered 'sub-human': blacks, homosexuals, Slavs, as well as Jews.**

So those stories matter even more. To an extent Strayhorn was protected by his peers like Lena Horne, Duke himself, but there were thousands like him who were gay, black and were growing up at a time when those things were not hip.

#### **Yet the lyrics, the melodies, are sensual, dark yet gorgeous...**

The lyric to 'Lush Life': My god. 'Life is mush'. But he was obsessed with gardens and beautiful flowers, and references to them pepper the lyric.

#### **And you cover 'Passion Flower' and 'A Flower is a Lovable Thing'.**

It's such a privilege to sing those songs. I did a lyric to 'Blood Count' but it was just too dark. We let Tony take that one! The whole project felt like a real 'no safety net' one, especially with no drums. Dave Green was just beaming from the second we mooted it right through to the final mix.

#### **Why do artists return to these songs?**

Well, I've not done 'Something to Live For' before. I love Sarah Vaughan doing it; Cedar Walton always wanted to do it (with me), must've been something that fell easily under his fingers. I've done 'Blood Count' before with Mark Murphy's lyric which is just astonishing. I thought: 'I can't top Mark Murphy!'

#### **Are you conscious of other people's performances when prepping classic material?**

That's a very interesting question. I used to be. Now I couldn't give a fuck!

#### **But you care about so much?**

I feel I live in a world that's far more accepting of women players. That's a good one for me. And the LGBT aspect of it: I feel completely comfortable now. There might have been an element when I was touring with line ups in my twenties and thirties when some of those guys might have been 'Mmmm, really?!' So that narrative is now okay.

And I'm ever learning. Doing this record was a learning curve. As was my *Greek Street Friday* recording, which is concurrent with this, which is rock and roll. We've gigs for that through the summer. Then there's festivals and we'll concentrate more on the Strayhorn project then.