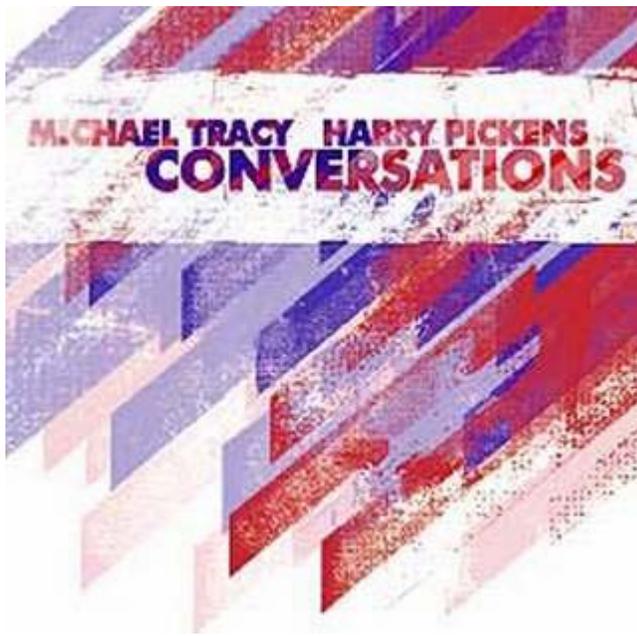


Veterans hit it off on 'Conversations'

Tracy's sax, Pickens' piano mesh in sparkling set of jazz duets

By Marty Rosen • Special to The Courier-Journal • August 8, 2008

In the realm of guilty musical pleasures, there are few things more satisfying than an old-fashioned jazz blowing session — one of those hooting, honking, raspy occasions where virtuoso musicians test one another's physical prowess and musical cunning in a bravura display of instrumental ingenuity.



With "Conversations," saxophonist Michael Tracy and pianist Harry Pickens offer a different sort of blowing session. Instead of hoots and honks, they offer up one of the most lucid and listenable jazz recordings of the year — on any label.

"Conversations" is a collection of 13 duets with all the passion, wit, intimacy and rigor of cool jazz — when it burns hottest. Tracy (who leads the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies Program at the University of Louisville School of Music) and Pickens (who has played with luminaries such as Milt Jackson and Dizzy Gillespie) are deft instrumentalists for whom even the most brilliant physical gestures seem effortless.

Conversations

Michael Tracy and Harry Pickens (Sea Breeze Records)

But it's the coming together of their musical imaginations that sets these performances apart: the subversive juxtaposition of schmaltz and dissonance in Thelonious Monk's extraordinary waltz "Ugly Beauty"; the urgency they bring to Steve Allee's tribute to Bill Evans, "Conversation With Bill"; the way Tracy's wry tone in "I Love Paris" seems perfectly aligned with Pickens' sharp-edged ostinato riffs; or the way Tracy's creamy vibrato seeps into the piano chords during the elegiac "Alfonsina y el Mar."

The mood is often melancholy — Dave Brubeck's "So Wistfully Said" and Antonio Carlos Jobim's sweet ballad "If You Never Come to Me." But there is also the gentle Latin sway of Renato Vacconcellos' "Invitation Note"; at the core of Pickens' sprightly "Something Soulful" there's some hard-swinging blues, and though Pickens and Tracy spin the notes like a velvet lasso, there's a fierce power lurking in every phrase of Sam Rivers' "Beatrice."



Harry Pickens

has played with Milt Jackson and Dizzy Gillespie.