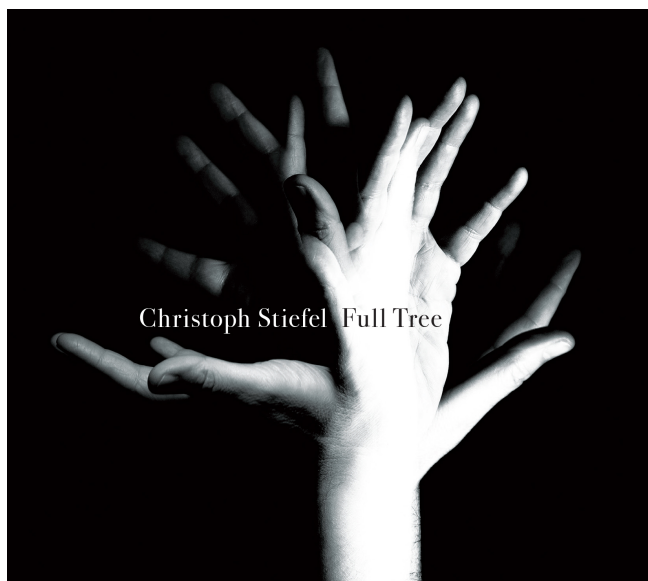




CHRISTOPH STIEFEL

FULL TREE

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When a portal opens, you are supposed to enter. On Full Tree, the new quintet and eponymous album by Swiss composer, pianist and bandleader Christoph Stiefel, all the gates, windows and hatches open and invite listeners to participate – from the very first moment. No matter where you listen to the album, a great, soothing breeze wafts through the room and blows away the confining mental isolation from the past years. Full Tree is a confession of the joy of existence drawn from the abundance of life and, not least, a fully grown tree full to

bursting with sweet fruits, one that carries Christoph Stiefel's decades of work towards a new level of maturity.

Christoph Stiefel is a master of conceptual diligence. Always fully exploring the spaces of composition, arrangement and improvisation, he prepares each of his projects with the utmost care. This is, of course, also the case with Full Tree, but rarely has the Swiss sounded so playful and relaxed as here. One reason is certainly the line-up. With Bastian Stein on trumpet and flugelhorn, Domenic Landolf on tenor saxophone and bass clarinet, Raffaele Bossard on bass and Dejan Terzic on drums, Stiefel actually plays in the most classical of all jazz lineups known since the days of bebop and hardbop. But he manages to breathe a freshness and flexibility into this ensemble as if no music had ever been made with this lineup before.

The Swiss keyboard painter Christoph Stiefel is better known as an introverted musician who often prefers quieter moods in addition to his isorhythms, especially when playing with his long-standing Inner Language Trio. But the wave of euphoria that pours into the ears from the foliage of his Full Tree is rarely found in his work. This is all the more noticeable because he has also played some of the compositions on the new album in his trio. "When I interpret the pieces myself on the piano, I tend to play in a calmer and more contemplative way," confirms the Swiss. Especially during and after Corona, I found it difficult to keep up this energy and punch all the time. In the recording with the quintet, however, I consciously tried to give the musicians as little direction as possible as to how they should play. Above all, that means getting away from one's own ideas. Not so easy for me as composer, arranger and producer of all the music. But it worked, and suddenly something completely different came off."

Of course, Stiefel is a musical all-rounder who knows all the ropes. He doesn't have to give his musicians any input, yet he can anticipate music that makes five instruments sound like a big band. There is no shortage of subtle parts, either. From the interplay of voices, impulses and intentions, something much greater than the sum of its parts emerges, all based on Stiefel's templates. The project began with a carte blanche from the Zurich jazz club Moods. Stiefel was able to design four evenings. He had some bands perform that he already had going, but also wanted to try something new. "A septet is nice, because it allows you to sound like a small big band, but then the limitations of a big band come into play. There's not much interplay and permeability there. In the trio, on the other hand, I have to realize all the polyphonic things I write myself on the piano. So I thought that I can sound orchestral in the quintet if I want, but still evoke the intimacy of the trio."

Thus, Stiefel cultivates quite different fields with his quintet. He wanted to see how far he could go with certain moods. "Lost," the last track on the album, for example, is carried by a much more melancholy mood than the rest of the suite. One might think this composition symbolizes, to some extent, the situation Stiefel left behind to record the album in this way in the first place. But, as we all know, from every ending comes a new beginning. For the creator of the compositions, "Lost" is a journey all its own, which once again bundles up the qualities of the band from a completely different perspective. That's why he put it at the end of the album.

The pianist has already worked with Bastian Stein and Domenic Landolf in his septet. He knew that they liked to play together and trusted in their intuitive inventiveness. Not least, he chose them because of their different playing attitudes. According to Stiefel, Stein is always ready at a moment's notice when it comes to freer passages; and while Landolf is more reserved, he can be far more outgoing when it suits him. In this respect, the bandleader has been inspired by Thelonious Monk, according to his own admission. Monk, too, always looked for soloists with completely different playing styles than his own. In the rhythm section, Stiefel chose two experienced musicians with whom he was not already playing in his trio. Since he already interprets several of the present pieces in a trio, he found it more interesting to get to know them from a different perspective with new people for a change and to gain new facets from them accordingly.

Christoph Stiefel lets himself be fully carried away by the force, passion and inventive joy of his fellow musicians. While he always goes full throttle in live situations, he usually acts more cautiously in the studio. "At concerts I get into a flow where I don't think about anything anymore, but just play and follow my inspiration, regardless of the risk that something can go wrong. In the studio without an audience it is much more difficult to get into such a flow. But in this recording, I was open and ready for anything, so I was able to let go much better and just let myself flow. I actually always feel like the same person. I always have the same joy, but also the same problems. The pieces themselves always already provide a framework. But when I have a situation like here, one that allows me to play more freely, then I play more freely."

It can be that simple, and it can sound that beautiful. Full Tree cultivates life for music. Christoph Stiefel reaches out with all ten fingers and the extended arms of his fellow musicians to the billowing diversity of life, sucks life into himself and carries his music back into life. An organic give and take full of humility, gratitude and desire for everything that may come.

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