

STEBMO - *STEBMO*

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A scene is only as good as its sidemen. Correction: a scene is its sidemen, because otherwise all we've got are songs and the people who wrote them. With jazz, the issue of who leads who is especially troublesome, as jazz, by definition, will not work without a conspiracy of many. In fact, sometimes it's the most unlikely conspiracies that birth the best music. STEBMO is a case in point. For a while now, keyboardist/trombonist Steve Moore has been a hero in the realm of liner-notes. Having recorded and toured with artists as various as Skerik, Sufjan Stevens, Laura Veirs, Bill Frisell, and sunnO))), he's one of those guys you don't realize you already know and so dig in a creepy MySpace-stalker sort of way. *STEBMO* is his debutante ball.

In a fitting move, Moore joined forces with drummer Matt Chamberlain, who has himself lurked in the not-so-deep-shadows of Marco Benevento, Brad Mehldau, Tori Amos and Critters Buggin to record a handful of florid tracks, owing perhaps most directly to Benevento's *Invisible Baby*. Ani DiFranco bassist Todd Sickafoose rounds out the core ensemble, but the contribution of string arrangements by Eyvind Kang (John Zorn, Laurie Anderson) and woodwind parts by Doug Wieselmann render the album a collaborative sonic offering in the manner of which only sidemen are capable.

Moore's simple piano tunes form the album's skeleton while architectural offerings on the part of the other instruments fill out its flesh. Favoring supportive collectivity over reaching ambition, there are few jaw-dropping solos here, only perfectly balanced songs that seem to have grown into precision, much like a well-groomed topiary. "Happy Ending" and "Majika" are gorgeous ballads that feature solitary clarinets and humble electronics. There's nothing light about "Dark Circle" or "Holding Pattern" though, as Moore digs into his grand piano much like the virtuosos Chamberlain has made his name supporting. Most tracks are gravely mature in their emotional depth, but with "Blind Ross" the band proves they can have a good New Orleans-style laugh.

At the heart of a burgeoning jazz scene resigned to define its terms in relative obscurity, *STEBMO* is an album that could be easily swept under the rug. As content as these cats would be to mingle with the dust motes though, it would be a shame to see this one go by unnoticed.