



artist bio

JOE LOVANO US FIVE

With **Folk Art**, his 21st recording for Blue Note, **Joe Lovano** debuts **Us Five**, a dynamic new ensemble and one of the most exciting of his acclaimed career that collectively breathes a youthful exuberance into the first-ever Lovano album to be comprised entirely of his own original compositions. Recorded in November after a preparatory week at New York's famed Village Vanguard, Lovano presents a collection of nine original compositions for himself on tenor saxophone, straight alto saxophone, alto clarinet, tarogato, aulochrome, and percussion; **James Weidman** on piano; **Esperanza Spalding** on bass; and **Otis Brown III** and **Francisco Mela** on—as Lovano likes to put it—drums and cymbals. He explores a wide spectrum of “colors, sounds, and feelings,” organizing the flow into passages for quintet, quartets, trios, duos, and solos within the unit, exploiting to the fullest the various rhythm section possibilities afforded by the two-drummer format.

In the process, he demonstrates yet again how deeply he embodies the qualities that make the label's imprimatur synonymous with the gold standard of jazz since Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff launched it in 1939. “Lion and Wolff wanted cats to find themselves and to realize that they had beautiful original music,” Lovano says of Blue Note's founding fathers, expressing a sentiment equally applicable to current President Bruce Lundvall's quarter-century at the helm. “They gave these incredible players the green light, gave them a forum and an outlet to record, and it opened the door for them to develop as composers. That certainly happened for me. I've been able to document a lot of my tunes, and I wrote most of them for the dates I've done. Carrying on in that tradition of being a player-composer is the legacy of Blue Note for those of us who record for them today.”

The better to force the music onto unexpected paths, Lovano offers his personnel—excepting Weidman, each musician is an associate of recent vintage—wide latitude to interpret the raw materials “with freedom to take shape and crystallize as we play.” He himself navigates the fluid sonic terrain with utter authority, moving seamlessly from inside to outside feels, finding melodic pathways, consistently projecting the vocalized tone, uncanny time feel, and penchant for creative dialogue that have made so many of his Blue Note recordings essential listening.

“I've always tried to be very free with inside approaches, and to be really in there when it's freer music, what they call ‘outside,’” he says. “The music comes out of our individual roots, and those combinations emerge in the music. Francisco Mela is from Cuba; Otis Brown is a real New York drummer; Esperanza has beautiful lyrical approach; the way James conceives jazz music, blues, gospel, and freer forms. It's an ongoing study on how to play together with mutual respect and an egoless approach.”

“It's the first time I've put together a group with people who aren't my generation, who haven't totally developed their approach, who are experiencing things for the first time. Everyone has fresh eyes and fresh ears, and this gives me ideas when I put together compositions that I had never played with anyone else before. Everybody is on their toes. It reminds me of when Tony Williams and Herbie played with Miles as real young cats, or when McCoy Tyner first played with Coltrane.”

In point of fact, Lovano's recent itinerary has kept him much preoccupied with Coltrane. He gestated much of the music for **Folk Art** over a two-year span during which, when not performing his own projects (which include his nonet, his trio, and his collaborative quartet and duo with pianist Hank Jones), his itinerary included consequential work with Tyner's quartet, with the Paul Motian Trio, and with the collective unit Saxophone Summit, on which he shares the front line with Dave Liebman and Ravi Coltrane.

“I've embraced Coltrane's music for a long time, and I've had a chance to explore his free-flowing harmonic-melodic late-period ballads with Saxophone Summit,” he says. “That and the spiritual feeling of playing with McCoy and Hank gave me a strong grounding in my compositional approach for this date.”

The feeling of late Coltrane shines through on the ballads “Wild Beauty,” on which Lovano, on tenor

saxophone, unleashes every ounce of lyricism at his disposal, and on “Song for Judi,” dedicated to his wife (“and inspiration”), singer Judi Silvano, on which the composer finds ample room for exploration and extension within the three different key signatures contained within the theme while also living within the lovely melody.

On the opening tracks, “Powerhouse” and “Folk Art,” Lovano brings forth his force-of-nature proclivities. He describes the former tune, on which he plays tenor, as “an original harmonic structure that combines things I study and work on all the time, trying to combine the turnarounds and resolutions of Bird and Coltrane in my own way, and working with Ornette Coleman’s harmolodic ideas—changing the meaning of notes as you play them by shifting color and key as you move along.”

On the title track, Lovano states the theme on straight alto saxophone over a polytonal vamp, evolves the flow in configurations that shift from quintet to drum-duo and back to quintet, switches to tenor saxophone as the harmonic material takes a more straightforward direction, and moves to more open-ended polytonal exploration on the final theme. “That approach for me is what jazz is,” Lovano says. “It’s a real folk music, and you can play a multitude of influences from your experiences in the world of music in your improvisation and composition.”

Lovano composed “Us Five” when he first convened the group in the fall of 2007. “The flow is different on each version of this tune,” he says. “On concerts, I start alone, but here we start right with the theme. Throughout the piece, different moments happen that express and explore ways of playing together as Us Five.”

“Drum Song” is an open-ended performance on which the drummers dialogue with Lovano on gong and tarogato, a Hungarian folk instrument that he describes as “half-clarinet and half soprano saxophone, with a lot of different colors and a human voice kind of sound,” before Weidman interpolates a far-flung declamation.

On “Dibango,” a funky line dedicated to Manu Dibango, the Cameroonian saxophonist-vibraphonist, Lovano plays aulochrome, a double soprano saxophone with one keyboard down the center invented by Francois Louis. “It’s the first woodwind instrument that you can harmonize on,” Lovano says. “I’ve been playing it for three years, and I’m starting to develop a guitaristic approach, playing single lines and clusters of sound along the way, as you can on guitar with the left hand.”

He plays alto clarinet on “Page 4,” “a simple folk theme that we play in a free, organic way,” and launches the open-improv-centric “Ettenro” (Ornette spelled backward) on straight alto saxophone before switching to tenor sax for a summational statement after Weidman says his piece on piano.

Like Lovano’s twenty previous Blue Note albums, Folk Art highlights Lovano’s unique position as an artist with deep roots in the bedrock vocabulary of jazz who deploys the tradition as a tool to point directly to the future. “Each recording is a summation of your developing ideas, of who you are in the moment with the people in your life,” he says. “To express them and realize them on Blue Note over the years with Bruce Lundvall is a thrill. This date projects future music for me, a way of playing together with people in an honest, organic way.”

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