

Matt Otto - Umbra  
JAZZ VIEWS  
Reviews & interviews about jazz and improvised music

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by Ed Sapiega | Oct 26, 2023 | Album Reviews, International

Matt Otto  
UMBRA

ORIGIN RECORDS

Origin 82877

Matt Otto (Tenor Saxophone)  
Jeff Harshbarger (Bass)  
John Kizilarmut (Drums)  
Hermon Mehari (Trumpet on 1, 4, and 8)  
Matt Villinger (Rhodes on 1, 2, 4, 6, and 8)  
Alex Frank (Guitar on 1, 2, 4, 6, and 8)

Recorded July 2022 and February 2023

“A vastly interesting set of songs reflecting the alchemy of musicians who've played together over extended periods”.

Matt Otto, saxophonist and leader, is an Associate Professor of Jazz Studies at Kansas University and an Adjunct Professor at Rutgers. Otto's website [mattotto.org](http://mattotto.org) contains articles and lessons for and about music. Otto has spent over thirty years becoming a master improviser.

For this CD Otto uses Kansas City and St. Louis musicians. Some, like the bassist and the drummer, have played with Otto for sixteen years. Otto and the keyboardist often play together. A saxophone trio plays on three songs, augmented by guitar and piano on three more, and, on three songs, trumpet is added. A lot of colors and textures to hear.

The CD was recorded in two sessions, one as a trio and the other as an expanded quintet or sextet. Both sessions were recorded live in the studio. As to be expected there is some very nice soloing by multiple members.

There is a pleasant contrast to the album as three of the songs as done by Otto, the bassist, and the drummer bring to mind Sonny Rollins on his 50's and 60's recordings.

The CD title "Umbra" refers to shadow or darkness and Otto states: "My music often seems to stem from a melancholy shadow-like emotion I experience when I write."

Don't think for a moment that the album is a subdued affair. The instrumentation and arrangements are spare and cool but formidable.

The song "Hawk" was written for Otto's saxophone teacher Don Hawkins. According to Otto, as the band did the take, he "focused on Don in my mind and my solo flowed from there." Otto was very happy with how the tune came out. Throughout the song Otto's restrained but interesting saxophone dances with the keyboardist.

The song "Umbra" floats along with an understated guitar and Rhodes electric piano. One senses the shadows that the music casts across the instruments. It is an understated, thoughtful tune with excellent playing on the changes.

The song "Wajiku" demonstrates the communication and cohesiveness of the saxophone trio. The song is an intimate dialogue exploring the middle range of the horn. As is true with the best trios, the drums and bass propel this song along. The bassist takes an impressive solo midway through.

"Esthesis" (or "Elemental awareness of sensory stimulation") opens with a probing trumpet solo that complements the sextet's modern keyboard-drum-bass groove. It compares favorably with some of Miles Davis's longer-form, spacier compositions. It is followed by a nicely harmonized horn section. This song carries you down a rippled river of sound. The lead instrument changes and the group harmonizes, but you just float along on this song.

I recommend this CD. The two types of groups work well, as units and, together, as a complete album. The different-sized groups introduce a wide palette of sound with inspired arrangements. The trio seems to have some form of mind meld in their playing. A quintet is on two songs and is augmented on three more by Hermon Mehari's trumpet, adding more depth.

A vastly interesting set of songs reflecting the alchemy of musicians who've played together over extended periods.