

Album "Second Chances" Review by Nick DeRiso

Experimental, yet very approachable, Argentina-born Pablo Embon's *Second Chances* is a listenable blend of the best elements of straight-ahead jazz, classical, fusion and free jazz forms. That means thrilling runs on the acoustic piano, skidding throwback synthesizer, interesting polyrhythms and gutsy turns on the saxophone, often all within the confines of one track. Take "Off the Edge," a rambunctious jazz experiment that plays in layered contrast. On the one hand, there are these insistent piano fills, pushing and pulling the tune along. Then on the other, Embon adds a more elaborately swinging keyboard pattern that elevates "Off the Edge" into this undulating platform for a looming sax solo. He's not finished. Next comes a soaring, 1970s-style electronic keyboard solo, and still more percussive elements. The result is a rollicking new take of the fusion sound that drove genre-bending pioneers like Return for Forever. "Don't Forget to Breathe," on the other hand, is a strings-focused, contemplative meditation. Yet, the orchestration doesn't crowd things. Instead, Embon's piano moves through wide open spaces, inside the rhythm and around the softly stated guitar, to create a twilight mood. It's perhaps to be expected from such a gifted, amazingly prolific writer. Embon, in fact, put out nine albums between 2004-09 alone. This creative outburst follows formal training in both piano and guitar, the last under Argentinian virtuoso Eduardo Isaac. Yet Embon never drifts too far into the studied, structured atmosphere associated with classical music. "Little Secret," for instance, mines the popular smooth-jazz vernacular, in keeping with the accessibility of Spyro Gyra's best work. The saxophone takes on more R&B flavorings, as a gently grooving time signature sets the stage for rousing solos on guitar and then piano. Finally, "Little Secret" goes even further out, approaching free jazz, as Embon swings things to an interesting close. A pleasant flute turn dominates the synth-driven "Only For You," which has the bright practicality of the more pop-oriented recordings by Acoustic Alchemy. "Grow" finds Embon again at the acoustic piano, beginning with a ruminative turn before this complex rhythm joins the proceedings. Working in counterpoint, they open the door for a sharply emotive synthesizer interlude, imbuing "Grow" with this concert-house grandiosity. Embon returns to the crackling keyboard sound of the opener on "In the Real World," then switches again to acoustic piano. The result is a multi-layered work of intricate beauty, both forward and backward looking along jazz's continuum. Same goes for "The Way Out," where Embon's blocky runs mesh perfectly with a polyrhythmic, stop-start meter. Embon, who later immigrated to Israel, deftly blends genres from his adopted home into the proceedings as well, with elements of klezmer and native sounds from the Hebrew and Middle Eastern traditions bubbling up. The title track, boasting a horn-inspired turn on keyboards, then comes charging out in a romantic tumble. Embon is every bit as radio-ready here, blending pop and jazz, as he has been edgy and free just moments before. "Soul Mates" continues along this path of crossover accessibility, with Embon displaying impressive R&B chops on the electric piano, in the style of George

Duke. With so many moving parts, however, it's to be expected that things occasionally grind to a halt on *Second Chances*. "Dissolution," for instance, is a bit too formulaic. A reedy synth doesn't provide enough muscle for Embon's ready-made soul riff, and his conversational soloing doesn't match the style and substance of his work elsewhere. "Lead the Way," which in a moment of incongruity actually follows "The Way Out," seems to trace along an oddly similar musical template, to lessening effect. "Getting Closer," although pretty enough, doesn't go anywhere. No matter. Embon concludes *Second Chances* with a final plateau called "Unveiled," an introspective moment alone at the acoustic piano that recalls the delicate joys of Bill Evans. Stripped bare to a quiet solitude, Embon brings his dizzying journey of reminiscence and experimentation full circle. And what a journey it was.

Rating: 4 (out of 5)