

ECM

Miroslav Vitous **Universal Syncopations**

Miroslav Vitous double-bass

Jan Garbarek tenor and soprano saxophones

Chick Corea piano

John McLaughlin guitar

Jack DeJohnette drums.

Brass ensemble (on *Univoyage*, *Tramp Blues* and *Faith Run* only)

Wayne Bergeron trumpet

Valerie Ponomarev trumpet, flugelhorn

Isaac Smith trombone

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Miroslav Vitous, the great bassist and Weather Report founding member, returns with an extraordinary cast of old friends, musicians who have changed the course of jazz, in an album at once timeless and contemporary. When Vitous and producer Manfred Eicher first began discussing this project - Miroslav's first ECM recording in a decade - one of the conceptual models was the bassist's very first leader date, 1969's *Infinite Search*. That historic landmark, produced by the late Herbie Mann for his Atlantic-distributed Embryo label, featured Vitous, John McLaughlin and Jack DeJohnette - alongside Joe Henderson and Herbie Hancock - and was long regarded, especially by musicians, as one of the crucial documents of the era. *Universal Syncopations* embodies the spirit of that time without being in any sense nostalgic. The new disc seems to make an ellipsis, continuing where *Infinite Search* left off, picking up the story. The central characters are now mature musicians, yet the purity of the playing remains its most striking characteristic. It retains, thanks to Vitous's compositions and concept, the freshness of discovery. This is the quality that links the album to an era when music was the only "agenda", before the speculative dawn of so-called fusion music, to a time when the protagonists were all still in the process of finding their voices.

There are numerous musical-historical interconnections between the players, all of whom were active in exploring many shades of progressive jazz at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. For instance: Miroslav Vitous, Chick Corea, John McLaughlin and Jack DeJohnette all played on Wayne Shorter's epochal *Super Nova*, a session that led to Vitous's presence in the earliest and, by common critical consensus, most creative edition of Weather Report. Vitous and Corea, still earlier, formed a superlative trio with Roy Haynes whose discography, launched with *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs* in 1968, was continued on ECM Recordings in the 1980s (*Trio Music*, and *Trio Music Live In Europe*). DeJohnette, McLaughlin and Corea all played with Miles Davis simultaneously, and Vitous also had his fleeting experiences with Miles. Miroslav

and Jack, partners on many sessions, played in trio with Terje Rypdal (*Terje Rypdal/Miroslav Vitous/Jack DeJohnette and To Be Continued*). Jan Garbarek and John McLaughlin met for the first time on Zakir Hussain's *Making Music*. And, of course, Garbarek and Vitous interacted persuasively on *Star* and *Atmos*, ECM albums of the early 90s, and toured together with Peter Erskine. Back then, Miroslav attributed their compatibility to a shared "Slavic soulfulness" - Vitous is Czech, and the Norwegian-born Garbarek is half-Polish, - a way of hearing melody influenced by shared folk roots, but that can only be part of the story. Garbarek frequently soars in collaborations where, relieved of structural concerns, his sole responsibility is to play with that songbird lyricism that's exclusively his. This is true of Jarrett's *Belonging*, the *Officium* alliance with the Hilliard Ensemble, Shankar's *Song For Everyone* and Gary Peacock's *Voice From The Past – Paradigm* (with DeJohnette and Tomasz Stanko), just some of the contexts to which Garbarek has responded with delightful soloistic invention. The work with Miroslav returns him, fairly unambiguously, to jazz, albeit a "universal" jazz, shaped by European and American perspectives. It is enlightening to hear him playing Vitous's rolling "Tramp Blues" or shaping free melodies with an Ornette-like buoyancy on "Bamboo Forest".

Chick Corea, not unlike Miroslav himself, has been a chameleonic player over the years, trying on and discarding a range of musical personalities. The nature of the work with Vitous on *Universal Syncopations* naturally carries echoes of their association in the aforementioned trio with Haynes, but Corea is also adept at providing impulses to the other soloists, and his angular, jabbing rhythm playing recalls the time when he pushed Miles to new ideas, on sessions such as *Filles de Kilimanjaro* and *In A Silent Way*.

It was Miroslav Vitous who introduced his countryman Jan Hammer to John McLaughlin, helping, indirectly, to launch the guitarist's Mahavishnu Orchestra, but the McLaughlin heard on *Universal Syncopations* has perhaps more in common with the pre-Mahavishnu player – with flashes of the focussed, exciting improviser of *Extrapolation* (with John Surman and Tony Oxley), and *Emergency* and *Turn It Over* (with Tony Williams' Lifetime).

Miroslav played on Jack DeJohnette's first album under his own name, *The DeJohnette Complex*, vintage 1969. Back then, as now, DeJohnette's drumming was already distinguished by its resourcefulness. There is nothing else in jazz like DeJohnette's elastic beat.

If the settings that Miroslav Vitous has shaped for his colleagues on *Universal Syncopations* - compositions both wide-open and subtle - cast each of them in a new light as old associations are reinvestigated from today's viewpoint, they also provide a superb showcase for the bassist himself. Long one of the truly outstanding bassists in jazz, his command of the instrument is complete. Perhaps more than any jazz bassist since Scott La Faro, he is a musician who has as much to contribute to the "frontline" of an ensemble as to any conventional notion of rhythm section functions, which he also handles authoritatively. He plays the foreground as much as the background - majestically.

Miroslav Vitous was born in Prague in 1947. At age six, he began studying violin, added piano at 10, and at 13 took up the bass. At 14, he entered the Prague Conservatory and simultaneously began playing his first jazz gigs. After working with Louis Armstrong-inspired trumpeter Jiri Jerinek, he formed his own trio with his brother Allan on drums, and Jan Hammer on piano. His first international success came in 1966 when he won first prize at the Friedrich Gulda Competition in Vienna. Amongst the jury were such jazz luminaries as Art Farmer, Cannonball Adderley, Ron Carter and Vitous's future colleague Joe Zawinul; the prize included a scholarship to the Berklee College of Music, which provided Vitous with his entrée into the American scene.

Within a year, he was working with the Clark Terry-Bob Brookmeyer Quintet. Miles Davis saw the band in Chicago and invited Vitous to substitute for Ron Carter at a New York residency at the Village Gate. A brief engagement, it nonetheless put the bassist in the orbit of such musicians as Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and Tony Williams, all important contacts for the future. Between 1968 and 1970, he worked with Herbie Mann and Stan Getz, joined Chick Corea and Roy Haynes in a trio that is still intermittently operative more than 30 years later, played on Wayne Shorter's *Super Nova* and Joe Zawinul's *Zawinul* albums, and launched his own career as a leader with *Infinite Search*, later reissued, remixed, as *Mountain In The Clouds*. In 1970, he guested with Miles's group with Keith Jarrett, Jack DeJohnette, Airto Moreira and Gary Bartz.

Conflicting historical accounts have been given of the founding of Weather Report. Wayne Shorter, Joe Zawinul and Miroslav Vitous comprised the nucleus of the first version of the group which, with a shifting cast of drummers and percussionists, issued five highly influential albums between 1971 and 1975: *Weather Report*, *I Sing The Body Electric*, *Live In Tokyo*, *Sweetnighter* and *Mysterious Traveler*. Other Vitous albums issued in the period included *Purple* (with McLaughlin and Joe Zawinul), and *Magical Shepherd* (with DeJohnette, Herbie Hancock, Airto Moreira and others).

Manfred Eicher had followed Miroslav's development almost from the beginning, having seen his trio with Jan Hammer in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s: "I also got to hear the tapes of *Now He Sings*, *Now He Sobs with Chick and Roy*, before that session was released, and was very touched by that. *Infinite Search* struck me immediately – and still does - as a very important statement. And I still have very vivid memories of the original line-up of Weather Report playing inspired concerts at Munich's Domicile Club on their first-ever European tour". In 1978, when Vitous toured Europe as a member of the Steve Kuhn Group, the opportunity arose to invite him to record for ECM. After featuring in a production project with Terje Rypdal and Jack DeJohnette (which also became a touring band), Vitous formed his own quartet with John Surman, the then largely unknown pianist Kenny Kirkland and Jon Christensen and recorded *First Meeting* and *Miroslav Vitous Group*. With John Taylor replacing Kirkland, *Journey's End* completed this trilogy of recordings. In the early 80s, Vitous took up a teaching post as head of the Jazz Department at the New England Conservatory of Music, but continued to tour with Corea and Haynes. He also issued the highly acclaimed solo album *Emergence*. Towards the decade's end, he was increasingly preoccupied with the new technological challenges of MIDI-Interface for bass and also with sampling; his patented sound library of symphony orchestra samples has meanwhile become an essential tool for many arrangers and composers. In the 1990s Vitous recorded and toured with Jan Garbarek (*Star*, *Atmos*), and also gave concerts with many other musicians including Terje Rypdal, Trilok Gurtu, Michel Petrucciani and Lenny White.

Conceived and recorded over a two-year period, *Universal Syncopations* was completed by Vitous and Manfred Eicher at Oslo's Rainbow Studio.

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