

MIKE HOLOBER & BALANCING ACT

Over the past decade-plus, pianist and composer Mike Holober has become one of the jazz world's busiest and most renowned big band mainstays—as a composer, arranger and conductor. Now, he returns to a small group format and presents his first CD in six years—*Balancing Act*, released on Palmetto Records. The recording features a newly assembled stellar octet, also called Balancing Act, comprised of vocalist Kate McGarry, saxophonists Jason Rigby and Dick Oatts, trumpeter Marvin Stamm, trombonist Mark Patterson, bassist John Hébert and drummer Brian Blade—all long-time associates of Holober's who have assisted him with other projects over the years but never have played together as a unit.

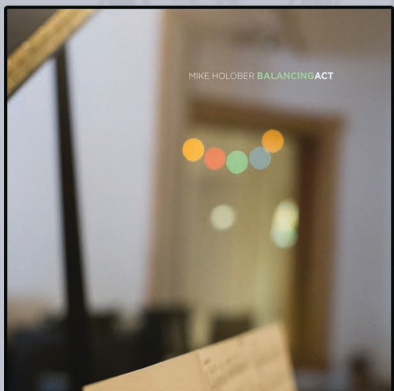
Balancing Act, speaks to Holober's creative examination of contrasting elements and ideas. The album mixes both new and older songs from Holober, plus two covers from outside the jazz canon and an original contribution from Rigby. Holober's five original compositions continue an exemplary musical journey in which physical and emotional landscapes provide inspiration and self-awareness—not surprising, considering his ardent appreciation of the natural world gained from experiences as an outdoorsman and backcountry guide.

The “balancing act” inherent in the recording also refers to Holober's musical intentions here. Although several of the songs on the album contain lyrics—three of his originals (the opening “Book of Sighs,” nine-minute-long centerpiece “Grace at Sea” and closing “When There Were Trains,”), as well as Billy Joel's “Lullabye (Goodnight, My Angel)” and the Jerry Ragavoy-Bert Berns classic “Piece of My Heart,” immortalized by Janis Joplin—*Balancing Act* will not be heard as a singer's showcase. Instead, Holober effectively employs McGarry (known also for her work with Grammy nominees Fred Hersch and John Hollenbeck) as another frontline instrument: McGarry actually appears on all eight tracks of *Balancing Act*, and is most often heard singing wordless notes.

After focusing on big band work for so long, *Balancing Act*, is meant to satisfy Holober's urge to lead a smaller group again and to make a completely personal statement, where the fruits of the collective are matched with band leadership and personal artistic goals.

Holober's long and fruitful relationships with the musicians on *Balancing Act*, give them strong ownership in all of the performances. Solos on the eight tracks seem part of the writing, elements that arise organically from the song structures and reflect harmonic invention rather than simple spaces to blow over. Rigby, in whose quartet Holober has played for the past seven years, tangles and meshes with Patterson—he's been playing with the pianist for over thirty years—on “Book of Sighs” and again on “Grace at Sea,” while Rigby and Holober step through tricky syncopations before Blade boils over on “Idris,” Rigby's noir-ish homage to the late drummer and bandleader Idris Muhammed. Stamm's trumpet lines find the nooks and crannies in the melody of “Canyon” before giving way to Oatts on alto sax with the rhythm section propelling the music forward behind Hébert's pumping bass lines. Throughout, Holober's piano work provides credence to the idea that his playing is a greatly underappreciated aspect of his talents—he's got over sixty sideman credits on recordings led by the likes of Nick Brignola, Pete McCann, Tim Ries, Dave Pietro, Pete McGuinness, Jason Rigby and Charles Pillow.

For the past four years, Holober has served as Associate Guest Conductor of HR Big Band Frankfurt in Germany, writing and conducting projects for Miguel Zenón, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Jane Monheit, Dr. Lonnie Smith and an upcoming Frank Zappa program for the 2015 Frankfurt Jazz Festival. Recently, he served as Guest Conductor of WDR Big Band Cologne, working with Eli Degibri and trumpeter Avishai Cohen, and had stints with the Stockholm Jazz Orchestra and the Zagreb Jazzorkestar. Holober has also conducted for Terje Rypdal on a recording of the guitarist's work and Billy Cobham on a Mahavishnu Orchestra tribute project. And as Artistic Director and Conductor of WJO, Holober arranged material for a wide range of special guests, including Joe Lovano, Paquito D'Rivera, John Scofield, John Patitucci, McGarry, Janis Segal and Randy Brecker. In 2010, Holober and the WJO premiered a concert length original work, “Flow: In Celebration of the Hudson River,” thanks to a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts.



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