



Swiss Movement

180

Les McCann & Eddie Harris

Speakers Corner/Atlantic SD 1537

What makes a hit record? Especially a jazz record, of which very few can be so described. You need to dig pretty deep in RIAA records before you reach *Kind Of Blue* with four million copies sold—that's 34 million less than the number units sold of the Eagles *Greatest Hits*, in case you were wondering. The RIAA shows *Swiss Movement* with a half million certified units, which may seem like small change, but for jazz it's a pretty big deal. Wikipedia claims that "millions of units" were sold, and the record is frequently described as the most popular soul jazz record of all time. Whatever the true number is, give or take a million or two, *Swiss Movement* was very popular and probably made a lot of money for some one.

The LP was recorded live at the 1969 Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland. In addition to selling a lot of records, the LP spread the word about the festival, in a day when international air travel was not something indulged in on a whim, and when print and television were the way news was spread. Atlantic Records founders Ahmet and Nesuhi Ertegun were also instrumental in starting the festival that is now the second largest jazz festival in the world. At this third outing of the festival, Les McCann played piano and, sang on one number. McCann was a West Coast musician and composer who recorded many albums for the Pacific

Jazz label. He signed with Atlantic in 1968 and came to prominence with this release, only to fade from view when he later pursued a heavier mix of funk and electric sound.

Although given co-leader billing on this recording, tenor sax player Eddie Harris had never recorded with McCann and played this date impromptu. Hard bop trumpeter Benny Bailey, Los Angeles session bassist Leroy Vinnegar, and drummer Donald Dean filled out the band. Whether it sold a half or several million copies, this session deserves its fine reputation. Opening with an extended vocal piece, 'Compared To What' with Les McCann singing, "possession is the motivation that is hangin' up the God-damn nation" we know we're into timeless protest lyrics. Roberta Flack recorded the song first, but it became better known with this album and was subsequently recorded hundreds of times by other artists. Harris' tune 'Cold Duck Time' gives Harris room on sax to take the album deep into funk territory. The balance of the album consists of Les McCann compositions. 'Kathleen's Theme' showcases Harris' affinity for Coltrane. But for me, Benny Bailey's trumpet work steals the show most often, especially in 'You Got It In Your Soulness'. Bailey was in his mid 40s at this concert and had worked on the big band scene with Scatman Crothers, Lionel Hampton, and the Kenny Clarke/Francis Boland Big Band. Soul and funk was not his bag, but he nailed it on this session.

Back in the day when well-stocked used record stores were

common, copies of *Swiss Movement* turned up frequently in the "new arrivals" bin. The white cover was always a bit tatty from wear. Unless you were old enough to recall what a big hit the record was, by the 1980s the band makeup seemed a little old fashioned. Great sound was not expected of live recordings, and truth be told, the original did not make a strong case to the contrary. Whether it was the in-house mastering or the Presswell Records pressing, it was hard to appreciate what all the excitement was about back in 1969. Atlantic seems to have kept it in circulation fairly continuously, and "audiophile" versions from 4 Men With Beards and Rhino did nothing to change that perception. This new reissue from Speakers Corner breaks this cycle of underwhelming reissues and makes you appreciate what a gem this was. My original copy had languished unplayed for years. Speakers Corner, as with their other Atlantic reissues, hired Kevin Gray to master the new version and it sounds superb, much more lively and dynamic than the original. Indeed, few live recordings come close to the quality of this recording job. Even if you think your tastes are too elevated for funk try this one on for size and surprise yourself. Benny Bailey's great trumpet work elevates it to a level where all you are thinking is how great this record swings and how great it sounds. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC

