

JAZZ SPOTLIGHT

James touches all his bases on a new album

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Bob JAMES has a secret life. Well, not secret to those who know the music of the pianist's adventurous early career, but one that is not especially visible to the fans who know James as a Grammy-winning, high-visibility star of the smooth jazz/contemporary jazz/ fusion movement.

He was far less known in the early '60s, when his initial recordings, "Bold Conceptions" (1962) and "Explosions" (1965), were envelope-stretching efforts strongly tinged with avant-garde qualities. A lengthy engagement as Sarah Vaughan's music director followed, along with diverse studio activities and recordings displaying his solid, mainstream talents. And in 1980 he began his breakout into the pop instrumental world via his own recordings as well as his work with the group Fourplay. Still, James was always something more than a purveyor of tone, melody and easily accessible rhythms.

In 1996, he displayed his roots in impressive fashion in the trio album "Straight Up." His new release, "Take It From the Top," once again reveals that his many years of dedication to smooth sounds and rhythms have not diminished his inventiveness or his sense of swing as an impressive mainstream jazz artist.

The title is a whimsical description of the programming, for which James has selected a group of songs associated with artists he admires -- material "from the top." Each is a prime choice, from "Billy Boy" (Red Garland) and "Tenderly" (Oscar Peterson) to "Nardis" (Bill Evans) and "Django" (John Lewis). James is careful not to simulate the playing of his musical heroes, but he doesn't hesitate to recall their individual qualities -- Garland's brisk, upbeat swing, Erroll Garner's rich chording (on "Caravan"), the punchy rhythmic propulsion of "Poinciana" (Ahmad Jamal), the precise classicisms of Lewis.

James' playing, superbly supported by bassist James Genus and drummer Billy Kilson, distills the rich experiences of his long career. Neither avant-garde nor smooth jazz, the CD is a pleasurable collection of mostly familiar classics, delightfully played, revealing an aspect of James' artistry that deserves to be heard more frequently than once every decade.

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