

TONY Z

GET DOWN WITH THE BLUES

TONE COOL #1153

If *cool* weren't already an indispensable part of the musical vernacular, it would have had to be invented, coined, or copped to describe this disc. Make no mistake, this disc is many other things: it's polished, as tasteful as you could hope, richly sophisticated, musically accomplished, of effortless ease and finesse. But it's the stone knowingness that informs this disc — combined with its any-moment readiness to succumb to the explosive fire that burns white-hot just beneath the surface of every track (the barely restrained sizzle of "Tone Cool" makes it sublimely suspenseful) — that makes it ultimately and supremely cool. (The brilliance and absurdity of Houston Person's quoting "Reveille" in the midst of his rambling solo in "Tone Cool" is indicative of its all-points, anything-goes musicality.)

Richard Rosenblatt, head of Tone Cool Records (oh, you thought the name of that track was coincidence?), helped Tony Z make this something of a dream project; and Tony fulfilled the dream by selecting cream from the musicians' crop: In addition to the redoubtable Houston Person on saxophone, Tony drafted Bernard Purdie to play drums ("because he's Bernard, my all-time favorite drummer"). He also recruited my favorite bass player (although, Tony neither knew that nor would have cared), Johnny B. Gayden ("mainly because me and him are MIDI'd to God together"). Duke Robillard got the nod on guitar ("one of the most rounded players I know"). And Sugar Blue's tasty harp was chosen to add heat to the spicy shuffle, "Roger Pace".

GET DOWN WITH THE BLUES / SOMETHING FUNKY ABOUT YOUR LOVE / TOO FINE TO BE MINE / I'VE GOT A NEW LOVE / PARADISE MEMORIAL GARDENS / ROGER PACE / THE BLUES THAT WAS WAITING FOR ME / TONE COOL / WHO ARE YOU THINKING OF / DON'T FUSS AND FIGHT

NY CD Takes:

GET DOWN WITH THE BLUES: For all its jazz, soul, and R&B inflections, this track makes it eminently clear that this disc is about the blues. Everything else is just added color; and the hues here are Tony Z's orchid, Johnny B. Gayden's indigo, Duke Robillard's not-quite-bright plum, and Houston Person's bursts of rose. All of them splash gently, as if in slow motion, onto a canvas of percussively punctuated, slow blues. If you happen to think there's no passion in restraint, check out Tony's solo. It seethes without excess and soars without ever losing its firm grounding in context.

SOMETHING FUNKY ABOUT YOUR LOVE: There's also something funky about Tony Z's voice. It's big and bluesy. But as his instrumental work made apparent in the very first track, Tony's not one to flaunt his gifts. Even in the midst of a colorful, up-tempo shuffle, Tony opts to simmer rather than boil over. The occasional eruption of a shout is only a reminder of the volcano Tony seems always to be capping.

TOO FINE TO BE MINE: ... and too refined to be strictly blues. This is a beautifully melodic instrumental and a reminder of how affecting a love song can be when it's sung by a Hammond B3. In this arrangement, Houston Person's sax will have you falling in love with music again; and you'll likely be recalling (and probably whistling) snippets of this tune, even after one listening. Isn't that the measure of a classic?

I'VE GOT A NEW LOVE: This cut would be engaging even if all we heard was Johnny B. Gayden's inimitably funky bass track. However, we're also treated to the Duke's subtly churning rhythm comping, more of Tony Z's soulful voice and tiger-by-the-tail keyboards, and a clinic from Bernard Purdie in how to play hi-hat and ride cymbal with snap and snazz — without creating the *shishing*, distracting din to which a lesser stickster might have fallen prey.

PARADISE MEMORIAL GARDENS: This slow blues pays homage to the late Albert Collins, whose remains are interred in the cemetery from whence this track takes its name. With offense intended toward no one, I'd love to hear the Iceman snapping off one of his trademark frozen leads over the Duke's artful rhythm here. But this reverent evocation is the next best thing. In addition to his cascading chops, listen to the atmosphere of Tony Z's keys — huge, spacious, ambient, and right on. Houston Person's sax solo is both tale and journey.

ROGER PACE: This is a swooshing rush of an up-tempo shuffle, opening with swirling madness from Tony Z., followed by chunky blues picking from the Duke, and capped by surprisingly fleet and jazzy blowing from Sugar Blue. Tony Z reprises the opening theme before the track comes to its whorling climax, all in under four minutes.

THE BLUES THAT WAS WAITING FOR ME: Duke Robillard's stuttering single-note introduction betrays the anxiety of this smooth groove's subject matter — in a word, *philandering*. With a relaxed vocal delivery, and a seductive ease and a sultry shimmer in his Hammond, Tony Z paints a vivid picture of pain and regret. Duke's guitar solo mirrors his introduction: stammering, struggling, and gasping out bolts of frantic expression, rueful and desperate.

TONE COOL: The title of this track says it all. This is the wickedest groove I've heard in a very long time. Recalling Paul Shaffer's theme for Late Night with David Letterman, at least at the outset, this number is swinging and jazzy, moody and expansive. It's carried melodically by the lower registers of Tony Z's Hammond, lubricated by Duke Robillard's fluid comping, and made transcendent by Houston Person's luminous sax solo. The hermetic tightness of Bernard Purdie and Johnny B. Gayden on this track recalls the seamless pockets created by Joe Morrello and Eugene Wright in the Dave Brubeck Quartet. And Tony Z's solo? Rolling, thundering passion — with utter control and a masterful sense of dynamics.

WHO ARE YOU THINKING OF: The Blues Anathema Patrol will surely be by to issue me a summons for saying this; but this tune is a structural clone of The Marshall Tucker Band's "Too Stubborn", from their second album, 1974's *A New Life*. That's only to say the form is not new, just the substance. Tony Z doesn't deign to croon this soulful ballad. He's too cool for that. He does, however, invest it with style, feeling, emotion, and, yes, authority. I would have happily swapped Duke Robillard's guitar solo for a little of Houston Person's sax here (sorry, Duke); but that's probably why I review discs instead of producing them. Tony's solo is whirling testimony.

DON'T FUSS AND FIGHT: As we might expect from the previous nine tracks, Tony Z and company go down swinging. Recalling the easy but relentless bop of "Tone Cool", Duke Robillard plays his staccato attack to jazzy effect in a brisk, nicely phrased solo. In another infectious display of their crack professionalism and elegant rhythmic sensibilities, Johnny B. Gayden and Bernard Purdie gather momentum as Tony launches his last solo of the disc. In any other hands you'd say this outfit rocks; but the groove is too smooth and knowing to be called rocking — rather, it rolls relentlessly, its swing the place of its players' habitation, not of their contrivance.

Had I known earlier what I now know about this disc, when I received the batch of discs in which it arrived, I would have saved it for last — not because I would have chosen to save the best for last (which I would have) but because I have no intentions of taking it out of my player for as long as I can now foresee. Now I have to work around it. Finding this disc is like discovering something you'd never known before, even as you knew all the while it was, it had to be. Like hearing whatever music grabs you for the very first time, it's brand new and familiar as home all at once. It's that good. It's that fresh. It's that cool.

Reviewed by Mark N. O'Brien