

CD REVIEWS

VISTA OBSCURA REVIEWS

2015 Juno Award Winner

“**Kirk MacDonald** is a powerhouse tenor saxophonist whose mature style matches fierce rhythmic drive with focussed emotion and the sound of controlled aggression. His latest CD, **Vista Obscura (Addo Records AJR025, addorecords.com)**, is a career high, winner of the 2015 JUNO award for Jazz Album of the Year, Solo. It presents MacDonald with the stellar rhythm section of bassist Neil Swainson and drummer André White, veteran American pianist Harold Mabern adding a special drive to the proceedings as well as his own animated solos. The CD is largely focused around MacDonald’s effective originals, but there’s also a special dimension to the set...Saxophonist Pat LaBarbera joins him for three tunes here: one is a brilliant extended version of *Naima*, Coltrane’s best-known ballad, entirely worthy of the Coltrane legacy. MacDonald and LaBarbera have long set a standard for mainstream Toronto tenor saxophonists – as educators as well as performers “

Stuart Boomer - Whole Note Magazine April 2015

“Last year, Toronto tenor saxophonist Kirk MacDonald invited a special guest, New York-based trumpeter Tom Harrell, to pitch in on his superb album *Symmetry*. MacDonald, who’s composing and arranging talents are often overlooked given the eloquence and energy of his improvising, crafted a perfect setting for Harrell, playing to his strengths with harmonically rich contemporary originals.

I offer this recap to help highlight MacDonald’s modus operandi with his late 2014 release *Vista Obscura*. This time out, the American guest star is jazz piano elder statesman, Harold Mabern, who at 78 has almost two and a half decades on MacDonald. Again, MacDonald has been the soul of hospitality, aligning the program to Mabern’s playing. The self-taught, Memphis-born legend is a blues-based player with a knack for driving, minor-key, modal playing, and *Vista Obscura* steers the music into Mabern’s wheelhouse.

So, the opener on MacDonald’s CD is a romp through John Coltrane’s *Lonnie’s Lament*, swung energetically, as Joe Lovano did on his *Quartets: Live at the Village Vanguard* album. In addition to MacDonald and Mabern, bassist Neil Swainson and Montreal drummer Andre White — a spot-on pairing although they live in different cities — provide crisp, centred propulsion.

Coltrane’s mid-period music is a guiding theme elsewhere on the disc too, most explicitly on an extended version of *Naima* and on MacDonald’s composition *You See But You Don’t Hear*, a charging straight-eighths tune that has *Impressions* at its foundation. On both tracks, MacDonald shares the limelight with another guest, his fellow post-Coltrane saxophonist Pat LaBarbera, who enlarges the band to a quintet and doubles the CD’s dose of muscular tenor playing...The disc’s other tracks are MacDonald compositions that stress lyrical melodies and more complex harmonic excursions. *Calendula* is a fetching waltz that MacDonald has recorded a few times — it’s a modern-day Canadian jazz standard if ever there was one.”

Peter Hum - Ottawa Citizen - January 16 2015

SYMMETRY REVIEWS

2015 East Coast Music Award Winner

“Following two splendid albums as leader of his own big band (*Deep Shadows, Family Suite for Large Jazz Orchestra*), Toronto-based saxophonist / educator [Kirk MacDonald](#) has returned to a small-group format for *Symmetry*, the thirteenth recording on which his name has been listed atop the marquee. In this case, however, any member of MacDonald's quintet could have easily laid claim to the honor, as everyone is an all-star in his own right, from the renowned trumpeter [Tom Harrell](#), who shares the front line, to the exemplary rhythm section comprised of pianist [Brian Dickinson](#), bassist [Neil Swainson](#) and drummer [Dennis Mackrel](#).

Granted, assembling five world-class musicians in a studio to record doesn't always pay dividends. Here, however, the idea seems truly inspired, thanks in part to their easygoing rapport and in even larger measure to MacDonald's admirable compositions and arrangements, which bring out the best his colleagues have to offer...In sum, *Symmetry* more than lives up to its eurythmic name: a burnished and cohesive group endeavor whose whole is actually greater than its parts. Definitely worth checking out.”

Jack Bowers - January 12 2014 All About Jazz

“The veteran Toronto saxophonist **Kirk MacDonald** leads a quintet without any special trimmings on **Symmetry (Addo AJR018 addorecords.com)**, exploring sometimes dense chordal extensions and scalar overlays (his solo on *Mackrel's Groove* aspires to Coltrane-level convolution) on a series of his compositions that otherwise move effortlessly on tranquil modal harmonies and a rhythm section that seems to dance and float at once, anchored by the resonant tone and optimum note selection of bassist Neil Swainson, the gently propulsive drumming of Dennis Mackrel and the limpid, airy chording of pianist Brian Dickinson. Adding special dimension to the music is Tom Harrell, whose trumpet and flugelhorn playing is consistently inspired and inspiring, nowhere more so than on the silky ballad *Eleven*.”

Stuart Boomer - Whole Note Magazine February 2014

FAMILY SUITE FOR LARGE ENSEMBLE REVIEWS

“Canadian composer/saxophonist [Kirk MacDonald's](#) *Family Suite* first appeared on CD in 2009 as a thematically connected medley for quartet (romhog 116). That might have been the end of its save for the fact that MacDonald and others who heard the various sections started thinking that more could be done, such as, for example, broadening the initial concept by transforming what had been conceived of as a small-group endeavor into something grander, transplanting its themes to a big-band framework and making it a *Family Suite for Large Ensemble*. To carry out the daunting assignment, MacDonald called on veteran trombonist Terry Promane, an associate professor in the Jazz Studies department at the University of Toronto, who set to work revising and expanding MacDonald's original design to produce *Family Suite, Version 2.0*, which is essentially what is heard on this superlative album, recorded in January 2012 at Humber College in Toronto...While MacDonald has assembled a world-class ensemble, loaded with alumni from celebrated groups led by McConnell, [Dave McMurdo](#) and others, what sets it apart are his tasteful compositions and Promane's astute orchestrations. The *Family Suite for*

Large Ensemble should quickly earn approval and applause from any family anywhere.”

Jack Bowers - All About Jazz - February 10 2013

“Toronto saxophonist **Kirk MacDonald** is doing a fine job of maintaining the modern big band tradition. His last recording *Deep Shadows* was a 2012 JUNO nominee and he’s followed it with another performance by his **Jazz Orchestra, Family Suite for Large Ensemble (Addo AJR013)**. Here trombonist Terry Promane has taken on the challenge of arranging MacDonald’s 2008 quartet album *Family Suite* for an 18-piece band, emphasizing brass lustre with five trumpets and four trombones. Promane successfully adopts MacDonald’s complex original lines to the weightier textures, burnishing them with greater emotional depth, and MacDonald the soloist is clearly inspired anew. The quality of the writing is emphasized by the performances of an all-star band that includes alto saxophonist P.J. Perry, guitarist Lorne Lofsky and trumpeter Kevin Turcotte.”

Stuart Boomer - November 2012 - Whole Note Magazine

DEEP SHADOWS

2012 Juno Award Nominee

“Presumably, there is no law in Canada requiring that a big-band leader's last name begin with "Mc" or "Mac," even though most available evidence would seem to indicate otherwise. First came [Rob McConnell](#) (and the incomparable Boss Brass), then [Dave McMurdo](#), followed by [Ian McDougall](#), Dan McNeill, John MacLeod and now [Kirk MacDonald](#) whose debut big-band album, *Deep Shadows*, carries on the tradition and does his kindred Mcs and Macs proud.

Not only did MacDonald write every number (five were arranged by trumpeter [Joe Sullivan](#), the other three by trombonist Terry Promane), his is one of the more engaging solo voices in an orchestra that is jam-packed with them. MacDonald's sumptuous tenor saxophone is showcased on the lovely waltz "Calendula" and dreamy "Deep Shadows," and he solos again with veteran guitarist [Lorne Lofsky](#) (so good to hear him again) on the variable yet persuasive opener, "New Piece" ...MacDonald, who is above all a serious musician, waited until the proper moment to put his orchestra to the test, an examination it passes with flying colors, thanks in no small measure to the wealth of experience and talent spread among the various sidemen (and woman). While *Deep Shadows* eschews much of the sound and fury often associated with big bands, it succeeds on its own terms, presenting music that is both cerebral and charming. And while MacDonald's name is on the marquee, the album is in every respect a team effort, with everyone in the lineup contributing sizably to the collective enterprise. *Deep Shadows* is a pleasure to hear and easy to recommend.”

Jack Bowers - All About Jazz April 5 2012

“Kirk MacDonald, noted tenorman and now noted composer, has put together a top-drawer collection of musicians to play eight of his tunes on **Kirk MacDonald Jazz Orchestra - Deep Shadows (Addo AJR009www.addorecords.com)**, with trombonist Terry Promane and trumpeter Joe Sullivan (who also conducts) sharing chart duty. The leader’s in the sax section, soloing at length in signature powerful manner on the opening *New Piece* and with considerable acumen and authority elsewhere. His compositions pack the passion in, though it’s not always obvious....High standards throughout are maintained, right up to the showcase title tune closer.”

Geoff Chapman - July 2011 Whole Note Magazine

SONGBOOK VOL. 2

2011 Juno Award Nominee

“Saxophonist Kirk MacDonald - an exemplary player, composer, band leader and educator - has established himself as one of Canada's premier jazz musicians. His compositions are geared to mainstream jazz, but he uses several tributaries to blood them and generate nuggets of energy and rumination.

MacDonald's integrity as a player is defined by his versatility. He can forge ahead and find unexpected nooks of delight that tantalize, or he can go deep into the fabric of a ballad and spin a skein of warm melodic lines. Whatever the mood, the sentiment is palpable. Helping him achieve that plateau is the same band that elevated *Songbook Vol. 1* (Addo Records, 2010) to a highly pleasurable listening experience. "The Torchbearers" finds Macdonald pushing the envelope of bop...The quartet is in top form and this CD merits close listening.”

Jerry D'Souza - All About Jazz - April 26 2011

“Kirk MacDonald is one of Canada's premier tenor saxophonists, shining first as a performer and latterly adding composing gifts to his arsenal. His Juno-nominated Kirk MacDonald Quartet - *Songbook Vol.2* (Addo AJR006 www.addorecords.com) is first class, a seven-tune session with classy sidekicks that cements his stature. The opening burner *You See But You Don't Hear* has power playing from all with Cuban-born pianist David Virelles, bassist Neil Swainson and whirling drummer Barry Romberg matching the leader's invention and intensity while succeeding songs underline the presence of vigorous probing spirits, plenty of mercurial moments and execution that's fleet and fluent. *Vanda Justina* is a pleasing ballad, *The Torchbearers* a surging up-tempo piece with long logical runs that feel just right and an inspired contribution from Virelles, while *Starlight* and other tracks showcase darting solos with seamlessly evolving and thoroughly developed ideas.”

Geoff Chapman – Whole Note Magazine – May 2011

SONGBOOK VOL. 1

2010 Juno Award Nominee

“Kirk MacDonald first recorded when he was 13. Since that time he has gone on to establish his reputation as one of Canada's finest saxophone players. Over the years, Macdonald has played as a sideman and has led his own bands which have varied in size, the biggest being the 19-piece Kirk MacDonald Jazz Orchestra. The wide angle of the situations he plays in has given him a perspective that is both perspicacious and judicious, opening a field that he documents with authority and finesse. The music, all of which was composed by MacDonald, breathes through the collective he has assembled. Melody is defined, then developed and essayed through ideas that bridge the head to a well-defined body of imagination. MacDonald is a robust player, but he adds enough nuance to let a tune speak volumes. "New Piece" finds him leaping into bop, firing off linear fusillades that tumble and twist in a hail of invention...He returns on the tenor saxophone to cut a broader swath and to define the tune in a more trenchant dimension. The CD closes with "Goodbye Glenn," a touching tribute to saxophonist Glenn McDonald. MacDonald is soulful and extracts every ounce of raw emotion in a stunning evocation. It's the perfect closer to a fine album that is infectious and absorbing.”

Jerry D'Souza - December 27, 2009 – All About Jazz

“Saxophone star Kirk MacDonald opens Addo’s account with Songbook Vol.1 (Addo Jazz Recordings AJR001) with seven of his own tunes and quality sidemen in pianist David Virelles, bass Neil Swainson and volatile drummer Barry Romberg. This adventurous music offers tuneful momentum, rhythmic flair and opportunities for bold contributions from bandsmen backing the leader’s warm, expressive and appealing sound – Virelles and Romberg are never still while Swainson’s lush-toned bass anchors proceedings. The opening, expansive New Piece features flowing ideas, and you understand how Kirk has embraced composition as well as stellar performance. There’s winsome balladry on Calendula, passion lamenting late saxist Glenn McDonald, plus fiercely restless work on By Invitation Only (no prizes for knowing the inspiration).”

Geoff Chapman – Whole Note Magazine – May 2009

FAMILY SUITE

“Known for his fiery tone and flair for burning tempi, Juno award winner Kirk MacDonald is one of Canada’s pre-eminent jazz saxophonists. Since the release of his first album nearly twenty years ago, MacDonald has gradually gravitated towards the strength of his own original compositions. Family Suite (Romhog Records 116), MacDonald’s sixth album as leader, is a personal affair. The poignant opening and closing theme, Dark Autumn, refers to the fall of 2002, an arduous time in which MacDonald lost his mother while still mourning the deaths of long-time collaborators Jerry Fuller and Joe Bendzsa. Each movement in the suite is meaningfully titled and dedicated. One of the liveliest, Four Shades of Light, features an electrifying tête-à-tête between the leader and Barry Romberg on drums, as well as Romberg trading fours with the exquisite Brian Dickinson on piano. Along with bassist Jim Vivian, the sensitive rhythm section is as good as it gets. Musically multifaceted as always, MacDonald delivers a highly rewarding, emotionally raw performance on this unquestionably cathartic recording.”

Oro Dagan - Whole Note Magazine – February 2009

PURE AND SIMPLE

“Whenever Kirk MacDonald heads up a session you can be sure you’re in for a treat. Pure and Simple is just that, four top flight musicians having a great blow in the true jazz tradition. The cohesion amongst these players is remarkable as they weave in and out of ideas propelling each tune to thoroughly reveal itself. MacDonald brings his unique and authoritative sound as well as four of his own compositions to this session. His lines are a constant flow of ideas probing the limits of an idea yet always thoroughly grounded. The rich tapestry of colour and texture always grabs your attention. Five By Five begins with an extended sax piano duet where MacDonald’s plaintive searching sound plays against John Taylor’s ever responsive piano. Taylor is one of those players whose skill at support is seamless only to burst forth with sparkle, clarity and a sureness that disarms. The structure and openness of his improvisation are beautifully conceived and executed.

“Neil Swainson on bass has always brought lyricism and kindness to a session and that touch is evident here, where along with one of his own tunes, Scene In Passing, we get to sample his distinctive sense of warmth carried forward by the quartet. Along with the joyful and incisive textures of Terry Clarke’s drums, this group is really held together by an uncanny sense of inner momentum. Each of these finely skilled players is given opportunity to stretch yet they never stop beyond the intent of the session. MacDonald has managed to put together seven well-balanced tunes, displaying his compositional and arranging skills but most of all his selection of a group of players who exhibit a commonality and shared

sympathy that turns music into magic.”

Roger Martindill - PLANET JAZZ MAGAZINE

“Tenor saxophonist Kirk MacDonald may have recorded his finest session yet. The music was conceived with all of the players in mind and that may explain the ease at which pianist John Taylor, bassist Neil Swainson and drummer Terry Clarke are able to transverse the often complex compositional territory. As always, MacDonald’s tone is clear and his solos are very focused. Another excellent outing.”

THE JAZZ REPORT MAGAZINE

NEW BEGINNINGS

[2001 Juno Award Nominee, 2001 Canadian Indie Music Award Nominee](#)

“This is a CD that bears repeated listening with satisfaction attending every hearing. While the music is often dense and detailed, there is a justness in the proportions, a balance among the solos, and a seamlessness in the ensemble that only comes when first-rate players run full-out on intuition guided by superb aural perception.”

Steve Pederson - CHRONICLE HERALD

“From the first notes of the rugged On The Sierra Nevada the session is hard-bop heaven...All the soloists animate the charts, turning up the improv heat as guitarist Lorne Lofsky, bassist Neil Swainson and drummer Jerry Fuller generate the glowing warmth of an open fire.”

Geoff Chapman - THE TORONTO STAR

THE ATLANTIC SESSIONS

[1999 Juno Award Winner, 1999 Jazz Report Award Winner](#)

“A powerful session recorded in Halifax by the Toronto based tenor is his best yet...MacDonald’s third outing as a leader pinpoints his fervour and fire, insistent search for new sounds and hard yet opulent tone.”

Geoff Chapman – THE TORONTO STAR

“...this is a strong, hard bop date that finds Kirk MacDonald (a player who deserves to be much better known) in prime form.”

Scott Yanow – THE JAZZ REPORT

REMINISCENCE

[1996 East Coast Music Award Nominee](#)

“MacDonald sounds stronger and more beautiful than ever. His impressive musicality in both his playing and writing continues to inspire.”

Campbell Ryga – THE JAZZ REPORT

“Satisfying post-bop effort, again stylish and substantial.”

Mark Miller – THE GLOBE AND MAIL

THE REVELLERS

“Tenor saxophonist Kirk MacDonald plays to the deep strengths of his instrument on The Revellers regarding tradition without becoming tradition’s slave.”

Randall McIlroy – WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

“It’s a measure of MacDonald’s inventiveness that he manages to find new things to say with warhorses like Embraceable You and Body and Soul.”

Paul Wells – MONTREAL GAZETTE