

SONOKLECT '99-'00

A Concert Series of Modern Music

Terry Vosbein, Director

Sphere

featuring

Kenny Barron

Gary Bartz

Ben Riley

Buster Williams

Washington and Lee University

Keller Theatre • 8:00 p.m. • 2 October 1999

PROGRAM

Set One



Set Two



"Playing with *Sphere*? Man, that's like driving around in a Rolls Royce!"

Gary Bartz's enthusiasm is obvious when discussing his new association with three of jazz's most sophisticated improvisers. Responding to pressure from fans around the world, pianist Kenny Barron, bassist Buster Williams and drummer Ben Riley have reunited one of music's most respected ensembles. With Bartz wielding the horns, *Sphere* is back in action, and the foursome's new self-titled disc for Verve proves that poise and adventure remain its calling cards. *Sphere*, the ensemble's superb return to form, is full of dazzling, committed musicianship. Comprised of improvisers who have relentlessly honed their communication skills, *Sphere* is at the top of its game.

Sphere formed in 1979 to honor the music of Thelonious Monk and used his middle name for its moniker. In an odd turn of events, they were in the studio cutting their first record on the day Monk died, 17 February 1982. Rouse and Riley were part of the legendary pianist/composer's combo in the '60s, and the *Sphere* songbook was initially rife with Monk tunes. Over the years, the members of the group have focused more on their own compositional skills. But they always manage to slip one or two of the pianist's nuggets into the mix. This time around it's "Hornin' In" and "We See." The latter piece contains several hallmarks of *Sphere's* approach. Its élan is threaded with a keen intellectualism, and each of the solos emphasize the lyrical nature of Monk's melody.

"We came out of an era when the people above us were geniuses," says Riley. "I listen to old tapes of me playing with Monk and I don't know how I was able to hang in there with him. I got some wonderful lessons about playing with space from Thelonious. And those are things I try to bring to this quartet. It's important to open up different spots so action has a place to grow."

On *Sphere*, grace is key to the combo's esthetic. On Billy Strayhorn's "Isfahan," they use creative tension as a way of sustaining a somewhat blue, somewhat whimsical mood. Williams and Riley are superb at steadily recalibrating the tune's rhythmic designs. And when the band takes a ride on Rodgers & Hammerstein's "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top," that old buggy moves.

Like their work in the '80s, *Sphere* is marked by daring and eloquence. Each of the players has contributed valuable tunes to the group's songbook. Barron's "Twilight Song" is a lithe look at bitter-sweet emotions with Bartz's soprano setting the tone, and the pianist's theme settling over each of the solos—much like the dusk that inspired it. When the bounce of Bartz's tricky "Uncle Bubba" is approached, the action is full of expertly beveled contours. Barron's solo is the essence of equilibrium—carefully conceiving his attack, he swoops down on the keys. "Buck and Wing" is an exquisitely sculpted update of bebop lingo with Bartz's alto pouncing on its phrases with a clear-the-decks intensity.

The band had not recorded or played together since the fall of '88, after the passing of its original saxophonist, the mighty Charlie Rouse. Their last two records with Charlie were the gorgeous Verve dates, *Four For All* and *Birdsongs*. With a decade's worth of accolades as a quartet behind them, Barton, Williams and Riley never considered continuing as a trio. They instead went their separate ways, intermittently gigging with one another as schedules allowed. But the rapport they had as *Sphere* always stuck in their minds. "When I play with Ben and Buster, it's an instant groove," reports Barron. "No matter how long it's been since we've previously played, our stuff swings from beat one."

When pleas from zealous audiences and booking agents got to be too much, the guys knew it was time for their unique take on mainstream swing to once again express itself. Each had interacted with Bartz in various situations. A wily improviser and on-stage firecracker, the saxophonist eagerly accepted their invitation to join the group. "We all wanted a horn player, but agreed we needed someone our age, with our experience," explains the 55-year-old Barton. "Gary was an obvious choice. We love his playing, which is very adventurous. He's got a modern sound, and it's going to allow us to branch out a lot." Adds Riley, "You can find musicianship easy enough, but it's difficult to find compatibility."

The band began its new life on a high note. A week-long stint at the Village Vanguard in the spring of 1998 sold out every show. Riley recalls, "It was almost like some rock 'n roll thing. The place was jammed, and everybody was smiling. Buster said, 'This isn't a gig, it's a happening!' And he was right." Adds Williams a bit more seriously, "The turnout at the Vanguard was indicative of why we got back together. People wanted to hear us again."

Those who attended the gigs realized how advanced *Sphere's* synergy is. The bandstand was buzzing with intricate musical notions, but what really characterized the action was the exhilaration of the creative process. Sophisticated, sure. But they were also having a blast.

“It’s gotta be fun for us,” says the 65-year-old Riley. “If not, how can the audience get into it?” “The unique thing about us is that no one’s resting on reputation or past laurels,” adds Williams. “We’ve got to prove ourselves each time out.”

The rapport that exists among the members of *Sphere* is one that can be traced back many years. Barron and Williams knew each other as teenagers around Philadelphia. They hooked up with Riley in Ron Carter’s double bass ensemble in the ‘70s. “Ron disbanded the group and we decided to stay together,” recalls the pianist. “We played with guys like Sweets Edison, Lockjaw Davis, Eddie Harris, Sonny Stitt and others.” Barron, renowned for his improvising capabilities, has recorded extensively as a leader and has received countless accolades including two Down Beat Critics Poll Awards, five Grammy nominations and he just recently received two honors at the first annual New York Jazz Awards. Williams leads his own band and his propellant bass playing is one of modern jazz’s most reliable sounds. His work with Tony Williams and Hank Jones as the Great Jazz Trio was nominated for a Grammy. Riley’s work with Monk is part of jazz legend. Steering his own ensembles, he continuously finds the nexus between vitality and decorum. Bartz has innumerable records to his name as a leader and his resume is as formidable as his playing. He has worked with Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln, Art Blakey, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, and McCoy Tyner. His recent recordings find him more potent than ever.

With the combination of Barron, Bartz, Riley and Williams, *Sphere* is rarity in music—no guest stars, no big concepts, nothing extraneous. Just superb swinging done with delicacy and intelligence. These days, that’s enough to warrant a host of cheers. Built on hard work and bolstered by great talent, their music seems more vital and unified than ever. Like Monk said, “four in one.”

