

By Mark S. Tucker

FRED HUGHES TRIO – *Matrix* (2016 / Shore Thing Records)

Pianist Fred Hughes and his confreres (Amy Shook on bass, Frank Russo on drums) can rightly boast a distinguished history, having played with giants (Larry Coryell, Claudio Roditi, Warren Vache, Jon Fedchock, etc.) as well as, since 1989, having been featured in many Right Coast *fetes* (the Elkhart, Rehoboth, Cape May, East Coast, Clifford Brown, and Mid-Atlantic jazz fests) as well as two tours of the Republic of Korea. Now, with *Matrix* and boasting 9 releases under their belt, one of which is Korea-only issued, the band's as formidable as it's ever been...

...save that "formidable" carries the wrong flavor due the the threesome's warm, very friendly, and gently adventurous wonts. This is not to say they're conservative, as is seen right in the opening cut, George and Ira Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm", wherein Hughes chops and channels the composers' chestnut adeptly, instilling a lively stutter-step within the bars and measures before taking off for one of his many sprightly solos very much in Guaraldi / Brubeck territory with Corea topsides, Shook and Russo remaining vivacious beneath and beside him from start to finish.

The sophomore cut, Chick's "Now He Sings, Now He Sobs", somewhat continues that vibe but with more of Corea's mid-period high-spiritedness in linear format (that is to say: unlike his glorious earlier chaotic marvels with Hubert Laws and similar hijinx cats). Bill Evans' "B Minor Waltz" receives Ferrante & Teischer-esque treatment, cinematically lyrical, playing large pools of calm against grand flourishes amid slow melodics. Shook's solo is a stand-out, highly sympathetic, as Russo lays back in sussurations and wise silences, a choice drummer rarely make...but should a bit more often, and a restraint he will show again in Pyotr Ilyich's upcoming coverage.

Beethoven's "Two-Part Invention #4" gets a finger-twisting right-hand/left-hand cross-flow emboldened by Russo's punctuations and Shook's peripatetic undergirding, everyone switching from concert hall classicalism to café jazz about halfway through, whereas Tchaikovsky's "Andante Cantabile" is a long 6:10 exercise in discreet quietude and naturalistic procession solemnly held, Shook taking a stately solo early on, sounding like a Bach insertion by way of Ron Carter or Gary Peacock in a high thoughtful mode before later bowing her stand-up for a cello-istic finale.

That leads to the third of four Corea comps (Hughes obviously is highly enamored of Chick's myriad captivating virtues), this time the CD's title cut, and we enter bop territory, Fred speeding through very clean very upbeat chops while giving both back-ups solo space to trot out their prowesses. Russo gets a really nice interval and shines, exhibiting a penchant for utilizing the panorama of tonicities percussives can express in the right hands, a decisive perception making the instrument kit far more musical than the backbeat-and-little-more we too often see in rock 'n roll meadows.

But that's perfectly illustrative of Hughes' wisdom in his choice of bandmates. Trios crucially rely upon perfect sympathies between all parties, any slightest miss will ruin a cut, and this triad is as solid as they come while simultaneously fully as accommodative to deep listening as to jubilant background atmospherics. All the cuts in *Matrix* come from the outflow following the Age Of Mingus, Miles, Duke & Etc. and dance exuberantly in the milieu.