

GOING FOR ADDS: FEB 4TH, 2022

FILE: JAZZ/LATIN

ARTIST: STEVE SLAGLE

TITLE: BALLADS: INTO THE HEART OF IT

LABEL: PANORAMA RECORDS 1011

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TRACKS

- 1 – Blue In Green (5:09)
- 2 – Le Sucrier Velours (Queens Suite) (7:32)
- 3 – Reflections (8:37)
- 4 – My One And Only Love (3:51)
- 5 – The Heart Of It (8:36)
- 6 – Kiss Lonely Goodbye (5:01)
- 7 – Si, See (6:29)
- 8 – If You Could See Me Now (7:35)
- 9 – The Four Margarets (3:52)
- 10 – (Bonus Track) “Big Mac” (6:50)

MUSICIANS

Steve Slagle (alto & soprano saxophone, arrangements, producer), **Bruce Barth** (piano), **Ugonna Okegwo** (bass), **Jason Tiemann** (drums), **Richard Sussman** (synth orchestration & drum programming tks 1, 4 & 9), & **Special Guest - Randy Brecker** (trumpet, tks 3, 5 & 10)

www.SteveSlagleMusic.com



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In a storied career that's produced more than 20 leader dates, there's little that Steve Slagle hasn't explored and accomplished. Yet here we are with a true first from the veteran alto saxophonist: A stunning bouquet of ballads. Inspired by lodestar outings from legends like John Coltrane, and driven by a desire to find a personalized path through the format, Slagle essentially came to balance history with his own story. "I really ruminated over this," he explains, "and I find it interesting to take on the challenge of trying to maintain one mood or texture across an entire program. But I didn't want this to be a traditional ballads record where everything sounds the same. There are a number of originals here. And yes, some of the other songs are classics. But I wouldn't touch those if I wasn't going to try things differently. I like to take an idea and put my own slant on it."

Indicative of that approach is Slagle's distinctive look at Miles Davis and Bill Evans' verdant "Blue in Green." The opener, and the first of three performances underscored by Richard Sussman's synth orchestrations, it provides an opportunity to draw brilliant new shades from the familiar. His follow-up – "Le Sucrier Velours (Queens Suite)" – takes a deep dive into Duke Ellington's catalog while introducing the core personnel. Pianist Bruce Barth captivates with Dukish depth, bassist Ugonna Okegwo offers plummy pronouncements from on low and drummer Jason Tiemann coats the curves of the composition with brushes as Slagle reimagines a onetime section scene as a solo feature. By the time guest trumpeter Randy Brecker arrives for a wonderfully conversational look at Thelonious Monk's "Reflections," it's abundantly clear that this isn't your basic ballads session.

Those initial offerings, framing Slagle with arresting orchestrations, highlighting the simpatico relationship of a fine-tuned foursome and adding Brecker as an alluring X factor, establish a three-pronged strategy that guides the entire program. Nevertheless, the music remains unpredictable. One need only look at "My One and Only Love," with Slagle's venturesome soprano working over Sussman's programmed drums, to realize that truth. Perhaps the riskiest play in the set, it pays dividends in originality.

Getting to "The Heart of It," Slagle, with Brecker beside him, puts purity of expression on a pedestal. Using his pen to bring Horace Silver-style balladry into the present, he creates a work of incredible beauty. Then Slagle hits pay dirt with "Kiss Lonely Goodbye," an under-the-radar Stevie Wonder song molded into a sophisticated, R&B-inflected gem; defines duende with his soprano on the coolly captivating "Si, See"; delivers a spellbinding "If You Could See Me Now," recalling many a night where he held audiences in rapt attention with that Tadd Dameron design; and pays homage to the strong and influential women in his family with "The Four Margarets," a tone poem sustained by Sussman's underscoring. That serves as the official end of the program, but, adding what's akin to a setup or stinger in the film world, Slagle drops the heated "Big Mac" as a bonus, making the final tally "nine ballads and a burner." Written with Randy Brecker in mind, and nodding to the important "Macs" in the leader's musical life (i.e. McCoy Tyner, Andy McKee, Jackie Mclean), it signals a new dawn on the horizon. Ever forward for Steve Slagle.

Notes by Dan Bilawsky