

Conversations (2008)

by Michael Tracy/Harry Pickens

The Sea Breeze Jazz label has been an excellent outlet to give greater exposure to jazz educators, students and other talent deserving of wider recognition. Saxophonist Michael Tracy has long been affiliated with the University of Louisville, where he is director of the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Program, while veteran pianist Harry Pickens, who is an alum of Dizzy Gillespie's band and has also done some impressive work as a leader on record dates, is his capable duo partner and fellow instructor at the university. The buoyant treatment of Sergio Mihanovich's "Sometime Ago" draws part of its inspiration from the memorable recordings by the late pianist Bill Evans and flugelhornist Art Farmer, with Tracy's tenor soaring over Pickens' inventive voicings. Tracy switches to soprano sax for several numbers, with Pickens' strident playing prominent in the delicious arrangement of Thelonious Monk's "Ugly Beauty," while saxophonist Don Braden, one of Tracy's former students, contributed the twisting post-bop vehicle "The Wayfarer." Pickens contributed a pair of compositions (both featuring Tracy on soprano) including his spry jazz waltz "Something Songful," though his solo interlude shifts to a swinging, walking bassline and a series of fun song quotes; there's also the bittersweet midtempo ballad "If I Could Only Hold You When You Cry." Their interpretation of Dave Brubeck's moving "So Wistfully Sad" sounds like a requiem, while Tracy's majestic big tone carries Sam Rivers' playful "Beatrice."

~ Ken Dryden, All Music Guide