

## THE BAD PLUS + 1

### Alt-Rock Vocalist Wendy Lewis Joins The Progressive Jazz Trio On *For All I Care*

For the better part of a decade, the progressive jazz trio known as The Bad Plus have been stirring up a musical stew that defies easy description. Drawing on sources as diverse as classical, jazz, rock, pop and beyond, they have created a singular aesthetic that forces even the most skeptical listener to rethink the commonly held notions of what differentiates one style of music from another.

Following the release of *Prog*, described by *Billboard* as “easily the most likable and listenable jazz album of 2007,” the trio wanted to try some new ideas and broaden their musical concept. To that end, bassist Reid Anderson, pianist Ethan Iverson and drummer David King take a giant step forward with the February 3, 2009, release of *For All I Care* (HUCD 3148) on Heads Up International. Simultaneously, Heads Up will release a limited-edition 180-gram double-LP (HULP 8148) including two bonus tracks – a cover of U2’s “New Year’s Day” and an original piece by Anderson entitled “You And I Is A Comfort Zone.”

A mix of highly familiar rock and pop pieces alongside some not-so-familiar 20<sup>th</sup> century classical compositions, *For All I Care* represents the band’s egalitarian approach to all forms of music, regardless of source, genre or style. To their way of thinking, quality and integrity can be found at any point along the continuum.

“The 20th century is filled with music by great composers, but it’s a mistake to assume that all of those composers are limited to classical or jazz or other types of music that are commonly considered to be ‘high art,’” says Iverson. “There were rock and pop songwriters of that same period whose work was just as significant as the work of the classical composers. They’re all part of a continuum of great music, and as such, they’re all worthy of recognition and respect. That’s what this record is about – recognizing the value of every aspect of 20<sup>th</sup> century music, regardless of the genres in which their composers specialized.”

The album also marks the first Bad Plus recording to include a guest vocalist as the fourth instrument in its sonic arsenal. Wendy Lewis, a longtime associate of The Plus and a fixture in the Minneapolis alt rock scene, steps in and takes the trio’s ongoing experimental ride to a new level of exploration and sophistication.

But *For All I Care* is more than just an album pairing a singer with a backing band. The recording is inspired in part by the collaborative recording by John Coltrane and vocalist Johnny Hartman, released in 1963. “Coltrane’s quartet had already developed a group language, and then they enlisted this incredible singer without changing the language of the band,” says King. “In that same sense, this is still very much a Bad Plus record. We just happen to have a great singer singing the songs with us.”

In the midst of The Bad Plus’ characteristically unconventional approach, Lewis strove to avoid theatrics and let the lyrics and melodies speak for themselves. Paradoxically, her sense of understatement is in fact a solid addition to the band’s sound. “I’ve really kept it sort of simple and straightforward,” says Lewis. “I can do the vocal gymnastics, but for this project, I chose to just sing the songs. We’re all improvisers in our own way, but I’ve always been a fan of Frank Sinatra, because he just sings the song. There’s something about that approach to this record that just felt right. I just let the melodies be what they are. I didn’t have to mess with them to make them exciting.”

The set opens with an elastic and surreal version of Kurt Cobain’s “Lithium,” a song made famous during the brief but monumental reign of Nirvana as the vanguard of the grunge movement rooted in the Pacific

Northwest. The inherently off-balance sensibility of the original song is ratcheted up dramatically by a tempo that seems to tilt and list like a ship on rough waters (for those who are counting as they listen, the track actually adheres to an odd but consistent time signature, says Lewis).

Other offerings from the rock and pop canon include equally offbeat versions of songs by artists as diverse as Pink Floyd (“Comfortably Numb”), Yes (“Long Distance Runaround”), the Bee Gees (“How Deep is Your Love”) and Heart (“Barracuda”). Juxtaposed with these are a number of 20<sup>th</sup> century classical pieces by an equally varied list of composers including Györgi Ligeti, Milton Babbitt and Igor Stravinsky.

The Stravinsky piece, “Variation d’Apollon,” entered The Bad Plus’ collective consciousness many years ago by way of Anderson’s telephone answering machine. “I called him once and left him a message,” says Iverson, “and when I talked to him later I said, ‘Man, what’s that great music on your answering machine?’ He told me what it was, and I got the music and I learned it. We talked about it over the years until finally we decided it was time to put up or shut up. The same is true of all the classical pieces on this recording. They’re all pieces that we’ve all had emotional responses to in the moment, to the point where we said, ‘Well, let’s just do this.’”

Even after the final mastering, manufacturing and release, *For All I Care* is still very much a work in progress. The songs were recorded in April 2008, then played live less than a half-dozen times prior to the release of the album. “On all the other records we’ve made, the music had been road tested for a long time,” says Anderson. “In this case, we didn’t have that opportunity, and we also just wanted to change the process anyway. So we worked out the arrangements and we had a pretty good idea of what we were going to do before we started recording, but it’s all still pretty fresh and raw. All the songs are almost as new to us as they are to anybody listening to them.”

The philosophy behind the album is cleverly implied in its title. While *For All I Care* may sound like an expression of apathy, it is anything but. The phrase is lifted from Cobain’s “Lithium,” but in the context of this recording, the overriding message is that The Bad Plus – collectively and as individuals – embraces and appreciates all forms of music, enough to showcase any and all of them in a single recording.

“We really care about classical music, and we also care about the more improvisational forms like rock, pop and jazz,” says Iverson. “I believe that we can pay composers like Ligeti and Stravinsky and Babbitt the respect they deserve, and we can also recognize composers like Kurt Cobain and Pink Floyd’s Roger Waters and David Gilmour as poets at the same time.”

In the end, The Bad Plus seeks to level the playing field. “We’re not going to treat one kind of music like high art and another like disposable entertainment,” says King. “We consider the whole spectrum to be worthy of our detailed attention and worthy of the same respect.”