

## Featured Artist: Pete Mills



CD Title: Fresh Spin

**Year:** 2007

**Record Label:** Chicken Coup Records

**Style:** Straight-Ahead / Classic

**Musicians:** Pete Mills (tenor saxophone), Tony Monaco (B-3 organ), Pete McCann (guitar), Jim Rupp (drums), Andy Woodson (bass)\*

**Review:** Pete Mills: composer, educator and vastly talented multi-instrumentalist.

*Fresh Spin*: a celebration of the tenor saxophone's place in jazz history as well as an updating of that sound to provide a fresh perspective from new ideas framed by the past.

The photographs on *Fresh Spin's* cover and in its liner notes make clear some of the influences who played important roles in Mills' development as a jazz musician. These would be tenor saxophonists with distinctive sounds like Chu Berry, Zoot Sims, Sonny Rollins, Stan Getz, James Moody, Coleman Hawkins, John Coltrane, Al Cohn, Benny Golson, Eddie Harris, Stanley Turrentine, Gene Ammons, Lester Young, Lucky Thompson, Hank Mobley, Ike Quebec, Junior Cook, Rusty Bryant, Dexter Gordon and Joe Henderson. The fact that these album covers had adorned vinyl 78-rpm records indicates not only that Mills has been listening to these tenor sax masters for a long time, but also that he treasures the music they recorded. Similarly, never realizing as a youth that someday he would be recording too, Monaco spun countless hours of legendary B-3 organ albums like *The Sermon!*, *Alligator Bogaloo*, *The Cat*, *Think*, *Blue Groove*, *The Honeydrinker*, *These Are Soulful Days*, *Bashin'*, *I've Got a Woman*, *Unity*, *Great Scott*, *Live at the 502 Club*, *Black Talk* and *Back at the Chicken Shack*. Such large record collections each of them must own.

Eventually, Mills's and Monaco's admiration for influential jazz recordings—and their musical abilities that resulted—converged when they met in Columbus, Ohio, though Mills started performing in Toronto before coming to the U.S. to study at the Eastman School of Music and North Texas State. Just recently Mills became a naturalized United States citizen. The resulting match-up on *Fresh Spin* would seem a natural for two musicians who share the same veneration for soulful jazz classics, not to mention shared infectious musicianship and their own stamps of personalized originality. The results are, well, urgently appealing with similar groove-based extroversion characteristic of the tenor sax/B-3 records that Mills and Monaco admire.

With but three exceptions, all of the compositions of *Fresh Spin* are Mills'. First, the exceptions.

Horace Silver's "Diggin' on Dexter" from *The Hardbop Grandpop* (with Michael Brecker on tenor sax) establishes haunting understatement through relaxed improvisation, and with direct reference to one of the inimitable tenor sax innovators, whose authoritative tone still remains immediately recognizable. Unlike some of Silver's faster-paced pieces, "Diggin' on Dexter's" melody weaves insinuatingly at medium tempo until the rhythm stops on the seventh measure for the tenor saxophone's unaccompanied cry, allowing for the tonal quality to capture the listener's attention, rather than the overwhelming soulfulness of songs written with the B-3 in mind. Guitarist Pete McCann's versatility should be noted as he provides rhythm guitar back-up until he recalls the spirit of Wes Montgomery in a beautifully crafted solo. McCann's effortless facility on "Diggin' on Dexter" contrasts with his fierier work on other tracks. Monaco's solo involves the power of the B-3 to suggest, rather than to shout, as he remains within the low-key spirit of the tune through even dynamics, his own tantalizing call and response, and the classic B-3 sustain of a single wavering chord embellished by ever-so-subtle-and-slight left-hand lines of harmony.

Another piece that Mills did *not* write does not evoke images of smoky organ circuit clubs wherein the tenor sax wails and moans, but instead is a tender and brief (2½-minute) duo solely of Mills and McCann playing Billy Strayhorn's "A Flower Is a Lovesome Thing," obviously based upon Joe Henderson's gorgeous version from his 1992 *Lush Life* album. Indeed, Mills' version is so much based upon Henderson's that he plays it at the exact same tempo in the same key. Interestingly, if you are so inclined, you could play Henderson's and Mills' recordings at the same time, and it sounds as if they are in dialogue, one responding to the other (and with Wynton Marsalis solos from *Lush Life* thrown in too).

And the third song that Mills includes from another composer is one that McCann wrote, "Crooked Cheese," which injects some angularity into a modified boogaloo groove, an opportunity that Mills' group seizes for all the dynamism it affords, including contrasting rhythms, Monaco's snake-charmer-like warbling, and McCann's blazing guitar solo.

And what of the fresh spins that Mills created in tribute to the tenor sax greats?

Most apparent in its recognition is "Eddie," during which Mills adopts not just Eddie Harris's instantly identifiable tone, but also his persona as he infuses the performance with irrepressible energy, Harrisian honks, challenging intervallic leaps, jagged chorus-ending accents, upper-register kind-of squeals and his harmonic interplay with McCann at the bridge. Drummer Jim Rupp kicks off "Talkin' with the Tubs," a drum and tenor sax exchange heightening the tension as Mills harmonically outlines the piece before the rest of the group comes in for more longer tones and broad chords...before they mix it up again with the tubs. "Too Close to Call" is a medium-tempo hand-clapper of a blues that gives each of the members of the group a chance to stretch out in soulful fashion. "For a Beginning"—which comes near the end of the CD—presents a gentle jazz waltz, with a feeling of four at times, to allow for some delicate crafting of the tenor sax solos, with Monaco all the while exercising restraint of the B-3 to remain within the spirit of the piece. And "Winter Rain," which Columbus experienced today, is a more impressionistic composition without the strict

feeling of four of the groove-based tunes, more attuned to something a Michael Brecker would play than a Coleman Hawkins, and one of three that feature bassist Andy Woodson, this time with an extended solo before featuring Rupp once again at its finish.

*Fresh Spin* covers much territory and, defying expectations, goes beyond a survey of traditional tenor sax classic solos, like "Body and Soul" or "Moody's Mood for Love," and instead reshapes the music to reflect Pete Mills' own talent and personality. And like his previous album, *Art and Architecture*, *Fresh Spin* reaffirms the fact that much jazz talent remains to be discovered outside of New York City and on some of the more specialized labels.

**Tracks:** Straight Up, Eddie, Fossil\*, Too Close To Call, Schlooze, Diggin' On Dexter, Crooked Cheese\*, Talkin' With The Tubs, Winter Rain\*, For A Beginning, A Flower Is A Lovesome Thing

**Record Label Website:** <http://www.chickencouprecords.com>

**Artist's Website:** <http://www.petemills.com>

**Listen or Buy:** [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

**Reviewed by:** [Don Williamson](#)