

By Josef Woodard

# VITAL Organs

JIMMY SMITH AND  
JOEY DEFRANCESCO  
BURN THROUGH A  
CROSS-GENERATION  
B-3 SUMMIT

**O**n a hot August night, people in Phoenix celebrate the fact that the temperature has dipped down from triple to double digits. Meanwhile, the proverbial musical heat is very much on at Tempest Recording, in the suburb of Tempe. A studio tucked in the backyard of a modest suburban street, Tempest is the aptly named site of a meeting between jazz greats from different generations—young-ish Joey DeFrancesco and veteran Jimmy Smith, the kings of the Hammond B-3 organ.

After one steps into the modest studio, owned and run by engineer Clark Rigsby, it expands downward from the control room into a split-level studio space below. There, Smith's full-scale wooden B-3—fondly known as “the furniture”—sits next to DeFrancesco's lighter, more road-friendly “cut-down model” B-3, smaller but equipped with the same electronics as the classic model. The stage is set for history.

What unfolded over the course of a few evening sessions in the studio for the album *Legacy* was a love fest and a long-awaited summit meeting for these virtuosos from Philadelphia, who kick bass and blow two-handed improvisational fury better than virtually anyone alive. Smith is the king and pioneer of the tradition who virtually reinvented the B-3 as a

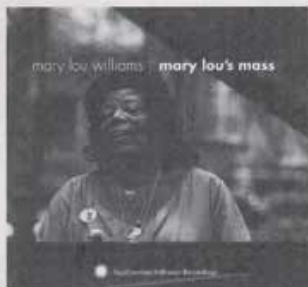
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post-bebop jazz instrument in the '50s and '60s. The ridiculously talented DeFrancesco is this instrument's revitalizing life force.

Although the organists released a live album, *Incredible!*, in 2001, making a studio album with his foremost mentor and hero was DeFrancesco's dream. In large part, he can thank Phoenix, where DeFrancesco lives and to where Smith moved in 2003. They join the growing ranks of jazz legends who have relocated to the city, including George Benson, Lou Rawls and Les McCann.

DeFrancesco, who played with Miles Davis and John McLaughlin before launching his solo career, is now 33 and has been an avowed protégé of Smith's since he started playing the organ at age 7. As such, *Legacy* (Concord) is more than just another brick in the wall of his discography. "Everybody thinks it was their idea, but it wasn't," DeFrancesco says. "There wasn't any plan that we were going to do this [concept album]. This is out of love. No managers, no agents. Just me and Jimmy."

On this Monday night in Tempe, the mood before Smith arrives at the studio is a bit tense. The organist can be moody or downright surly, although DeFrancesco insists, "He's not as cranky as he seems." He has also been known to have dim regard for journalists. I meet Smith, who looks stylish in red pants, white shirt and a black cap, and extend my hand. The organist ignores the hand, offering a sideways glance and growling, "How much you gonna' charge me?" Later in the studio, he looks shiftily at me, muttering, "He's from the union."

Cryptic behavior and manicured mystique aside, when Smith gets down to business behind his "furniture," creative fire is unleashed. At various times, Smith has been taken for granted, when the B-3 has been considered a more marginal cul-de-sac in jazz. But these days, at age 76, he's got wisdom and fire on his side. Maybe it takes a spark like his admiring protégé—who is also currently producing Smith's first recording for Concord—to get him, and keep him, in shape.

When together, the organists are simpatico and share an easy-going rapport. They egg each other on and answer challenges or shifts of conversational direction. And they make beautiful music together.

Before kicking off with "Corcovado," DeFrancesco's instructions are minimal. "I'll play this church, and then you start," he nods to Smith. DeFrancesco's gospelish intro turns left into Smith's playfully wayward melody statement. Smith, getting into the spirit, tosses in a

quote from "Going Out Of My Head" on the end vamp, which won't quit, in the best way. "Those Latin tags are the shit," DeFrancesco says after the take, with a big grin.

Latin pulses carry on into the evening, as the Los Angeles-based Banda Brothers lend their musical wares on the Afro-Cuban grooving "Back At The Chicken Shack" and a Cuban-ized version of "St. Thomas" with guitarist Paul Bollenback getting a surrogate tres sound on a 12-string guitar.

On the ballad "I'll Close My Eyes," Smith takes the head and tosses in a few left-jab quirks early on, setting the stage for a wild solo by DeFrancesco. Unlike earlier expan-



sively vamping takes, this one comes in concisely, after which producer John Burk, with a laugh, says, "It's the single." There are no hits or singles here, but the album should be taken seriously as one of the more important meetings of the jazz year.

After a few hours, Smith announces it's time to leave, and gives DeFrancesco a warm embrace. After Smith is gone, DeFrancesco beams, "He gave me a hug. He doesn't do that kind of stuff." The work goes on, as they add Bollenback overdubs on wah-wah guitar (against Smith's gritty vocal on "I've Got My Mojo Workin'") and the exotic flavor of electric sitar on the title tune.

Listening to rough mixes, DeFrancesco cocks his head and makes what some might find a startling confession, noting that "sometimes when I hear us both, I'm not sure who's playing what. It's weird." Or maybe not.

One morning a few days before Thanksgiving, the pair are hanging out at Bobby C.'s, a Phoenix jazz club. To be more precise, Smith clarifies, "the club." The place is run by Bob Clayton, Smith's manager, and the subject of the *Legacy* tune "Blues For Bobby C." The night before, the joint was hopping. Sunday nights at Bobby C.'s are becoming legendary, as the city's famous jazz players convene to stretch out.

In the '70s, Smith tried his hand at running a jazz club, Jimmy Smith's Supper Club, in Los Angeles. "Never again, please," he says when looking back at his experience in the club business. "Bobby C. is going through the same shit. He's finding out how hard it is to own a club."

DeFrancesco adds, "Except Bob gets Jimmy Smith, George Benson and Joey DeFrancesco for free on Sundays."

In the afterglow of having finished *Legacy*, DeFrancesco has even more admiration than usual for Smith. "He's the man," DeFrancesco says. "He's still kicking asses all over the place. We come here on Sundays and we play. We'll be playing with the band. Then he gets up there and plays some shit by himself, solo organ stuff that will knock you off your chair. Then I'm asking questions again. Back to the drawing board."

As Smith explains, the Jimmy-Joey mentor-protégé connection goes back to "when Joey was about 7 years old. His dad brought him up to Harlem. He was just a baby."

"I remember that like yesterday," DeFrancesco says. "We have pictures of it. Jimmy was everything to me. My dad's an organ player, too. We had all the records. He said, 'It's time you go see the man.' I went and Jimmy was cool and warm. He had me on the bench with him. We've stayed in contact all these years."

Both organists have had notable releases in recent years, just in time to fuel the renewed interest in the B-3 as a vital jazz voice. Even the instrument itself has made a comeback: Hammond makes the B-3 again, after a hiatus between 1975 and 2002. Smith broke a dry spell in his discography with 2001's *Dot Com Blues*, featuring cameos by Dr. John, B.B. King, Etta James and Taj Mahal. That album's title track is also on the new album. DeFrancesco's 2003 project for Concord, *Falling In Love Again*, was an engagement with his friend actor Joe Pesci, whose sweet, peeling voice is reminiscent of Jimmy Scott.

For *Legacy*, DeFrancesco wanted to assemble diverse material to best showcase the pair, and especially his hero. "I wanted him to stretch out and get to do all the things that I know he does better than anybody.

"Jimmy is one of the most innovative musicians of all time," DeFrancesco continues. "Everybody knows what he did with the organ, but it wasn't just about the organ. It was about the style that he played in. It influenced everybody. After that, the rock organ players, the blues players—anybody who played—were influenced by him. The settings, the sound, even the harmonic sense. He was playing things that Coltrane would be playing, before Coltrane."

Tracing the B-3's history in jazz, DeFrancesco points out that Smith was the one who updated the jazz organ combo sound pioneered by Wild Bill Davis (1918-'95). Smith, DeFrancesco points out, "Heard that sound. But Wild Bill was basically playing something like a big band on the organ. He wasn't playing single lines and he wasn't playing tempos or bebop."

One of *Legacy*'s tracks is an unusual collaborative composition "Jones'n For Elvin," dedicated to Elvin Jones. DeFrancesco transcribed a line from one of Smith's solos from his 1965 album *The Boss*, commenting that he "wrote a melody out of it. And we put [James] Moody on there."

On the album's title track, DeFrancesco plays piano, showing a skill he doesn't often reveal. "I had a Coltrane vibe on there," he says. "Jimmy's playing reminds me a lot of that era and the way Trane played. I was trying to give it that sound by doing a McCoy [Tyner]-type piano comping, legato playing. Piano's a much more staccato instrument, where the organ's legato, like a horn."

While Smith hasn't had much experience playing with other jazz organists, DeFrancesco has periodically gotten together with other players, especially certain respected elders. Working with other B-3 players, DeFrancesco says, "shouldn't be a challenge. You just have to listen. But it can be a challenge, because I've played with some other organists, and they don't listen. They play chords. Jimmy listens to everything. The egos don't get in the way."

Smith joins in, "I hate that."

DeFrancesco goes on to say that Smith, "totally listens to me. He's watching everything and plays underneath. We recorded one thing and, after, he said, 'I played too loud on that.' There's none of that ego thing happen-

ing. Maybe 30 years ago he would have been ready to kick my ass."

Does Smith feel an ease in playing with DeFrancesco compared to other organists? "No. You know why? Because I hate him," he says, pausing, then issuing a belly laugh.

Any discussion of the B-3 is liable to at least broach the topic of the heavy, cumbersome nature of the instrument, compared to



virtually any other jazz tool. "Tell me about it," Smith says. "My back is not right after years of doing it. If you're dancing on the third floor, think about me sometimes. There's nothing like carrying one of those things up three flights."

"Jimmy was playing during a time when there were no organ rentals," DeFrancesco says. "You had to bring your own. He had to rent a hearse, because there were no vans."

Smith picks up the story, calling his touring vehicle "a dead wagon. I had three of them. I had a cut-down version and my guitar player, Quentin Warren, used to sleep in the back. An officer stopped us in Detroit one time. He had me open the back door. 'Open that back door!' He scared me to death. Quentin was laying down back there. He is light-skinned. He looked like he was dead. The officer shined his light back there where Quentin was. He had me close the door so quick. I said, 'What's the matter?' He said, 'You're carrying live people in the dead wagon.'"

Smith gets bored or cagey. "On these

lines," he says, "the story that you're giving to DownBeat, are you offering us any money? Joe, are we getting a cut or what?"

Sensing the early stages of a communication breakdown, DeFrancesco tries to run interference, saying, "See, he's a comedian."

The interview continues, but Smith keeps deferring to the money angle. "We're not getting enough money for what we're doing. Can you send a donation?"

Smith talks about plans to make his first Concord album, adding, "Now are you gonna' contribute any money to that thing?"

Insert laughter here.

**A** week later, DeFrancesco is in Manhattan, playing a week run with his trio at the new Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola in the Jazz at Lincoln Center Frederick P. Rose Hall. After a lunch of ribs at Blue Smoke, DeFrancesco offered some clarifications and expansions on the earlier conversation.

He notes that his initial meeting with Smith was actually at the Sheraton in Manhattan. "They used to have a jazz room in there," he remembers. "I didn't want to interrupt Jimmy. Harlem sounded hipper. But that's the truth."

Leading up to that meeting, the young DeFrancesco, son of the respected jazz organist "Papa" John DeFrancesco, had made contact with Smith in an unusual way. Impressed with a Smith album recorded live at his L.A. supper club, Joey noticed a phone number on a matchbook, visible on the album jacket. Being a smitten fan, 7-year-old DeFrancesco called that number and, "It was directly to Jimmy's house," he says. "I got his secretary and said, 'I want to speak to Jimmy Smith.' He called back two days later. My dad talked to him first, and wondered why Jimmy Smith was calling the house. I got on the phone and I was speechless, because, to me, he was everything."

"Taking a train up to New York was no problem, so my mom and dad took me up to Manhattan to meet him. He treated me well. That's where it started. The next time I saw him I was 9, and pretty much every year after that. Whenever he was in town, I was there. But he didn't really hear me play until I was 15."

By then, DeFrancesco was deep into jazz organ tradition, which made him something of an oddity in the '80s jazz scene. At the time, he says, "Nobody was messing around with the organ. You could buy a B-3 for \$500."

Asked about the improving conditions on the jazz organ scene, DeFrancesco points back to his main man. "It was Jimmy Smith who was No. 1," he says. "Whoever was No. 2 was not No. 2. It was like No. 12, as far as

the level of what Jimmy could do. He could do everything. He could be funky. He could be harmonic. Ballads. Sensitivity, soulfulness, technique, groove. One guy might have technique, one might have grooved hard, one guy is more churchy. But he had all of that wrapped into one. Nobody even came close.

"Not to be egotistical, but I'm the first one who fits that mold," he continues. "I'm lucky, because when I started playing, most of Jimmy's best work was already available to me, and [Jimmy] McGriff and all those guys. All their best shit was out there, so I had that to draw from. So there's no excuse that I should be the one, with the lesson of evolution.

"What that does now is up the ante for organ playing. You notice now that with the guys who play organ, it's a little bit better class of musician. I'm trying to find the right words not to demean any of the other legendary guys. Larry Goldings is a well-rounded musician. He doesn't just play blues and boogaloes. That's cool, too, but in the '60s, there were guys who played the organ for six or seven months, played a pretty decent blues in F and got a deal on Blue Note.

"Now, you've got people like Sam Yahel and a kid from Denver, Pat Bianchi, who's incredible. He's influenced by myself, but he's got the whole genre going."

Is there a taste of sweet vindication seeing the organ getting more respect at the moment?

"Yeah. Are you kidding? I love that I'm responsible. And now, with me and Jimmy together, that doesn't happen every day."

**S**everal weeks later, DeFrancesco and his mentor showed up for a quick stint at Catalina Bar and Grill in Los Angeles. The club's newly expanded locale on Sunset Boulevard, sits prettily on the other side of town from Smith's old '70s supper club. A casual jazz gig suddenly seems like a history lesson in the art of the jazz organ. On his own in this trio setting, DeFrancesco takes the organ home to the church for "O Holy Night" and then for a bluesy secular spin on "Winter Wonderland."

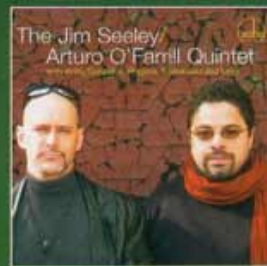
When Smith comes up and perches across the stage from DeFrancesco, the sparks and mutual admiration fly on blues, funk and Latinized workouts. Smith growls out a vocal on "Got My Mojo Workin'," muttering an only half-intelligible, street-friendly spiel in the middle. What the old school rap lacks in decipherability, it gains in the aura of supreme hipness. After the tune, he tells the wowed audience, with a shrug, "That's a little something I threw together." With Smith's creative pistons firing boldly again, he still dazzles and pushes the B-3 to new places.

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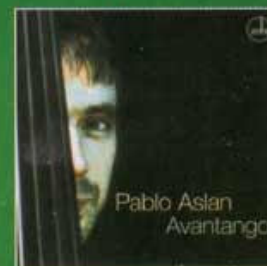
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