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Chris Potter Underground

Follow the Red Line

[Live at the Village Vanguard]

(Sunnyside)

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by Will Layman

For the last half century, the tenor saxophone has been the top dog in jazz, the instrument that carries the most heft in the community. It's the heavyweight voice that typically isn't cute or clever. Not many tenor saxophonists will settle for being coy.

Chris Potter, album-by-album and show-by-show over the last ten years, has made a bid for the tenor title. He has been playing with the best bandleaders (from Dave Holland to Steely Dan), and he has been leading his own potent groups. Though Potter does not possess a larger-than-life persona, he builds gargantuan solos with the personality of a freight train: slow at first, then surging and bold, and finally explosive and spectacular. Potter's band Underground is his most hard-hitting outfit, and this document of the band's tenure in the legendary Greenwich Village basement club bristles with daring and funk energy. What a great record!

Follow the Red Line features not only Potter's tenor but also a fully integrated rhythm section: Craig Taborn's Fender Rhodes electric piano, Adam Rogers on electric guitar, and Nate Smith's drums. This is a band that could court cliché—an electric "fusion" band that integrates funk rhythms with jazz—and that would seem to be lacking an important tool: a bass player. But, in fact, the opposite is true. Underground is a band that pulses with invention. With Potter out front, the band is precisely the opposite of generic. Each player is pressed into varied service: Taborn plays bass lines as well as ripping chords, Rogers is both distorted and clean, choppy and legato, and Smith is polyrhythmic fallout—a dizzying clatter of arms and legs in flowing groove.

Even compared to the band's first studio outing from early 2006, this is a progression. While the tunes still begin with intelligently composed, carefully voiced arrangements, there is a boiling beneath the surface that rises quickly enough to the surface. On "Arjuna", for example, the ensemble section bristles with Smith's nasty stickwork, then Taborn's solo starts at a simmer and starts to flare up as the punches of left-hand Rhodesplay is complicated by Rogers stuttering guitar. When Potter enters, it is predictably with his own stuttering 'plosions of breath, adding another pointillistic layer to the polyrhythm. The solo climaxes in a series of serpentine rips that alternate with architectural steps through the harmony.

Equally impressive are the more consonant moments, such as the statement of melody on "Pop Song #1", where a pleasant and inevitable tune is set amidst a flow of surprising chords. Rogers plays with a pungent simplicity, and Taborn patiently waits for each downbeat before playing his gospel-infused chords. On Potter's solo, however, the band gets into an improbably hot funk groove that seems to build off the basic guitar line. "Viva las Vinius" is first built off a single rhythm lick, and the band seems ready to ride the thing through the whole performance. It's even more of the treat, then, when Potter's solo begins in a slowed-down free time that *very* gradually builds from slow and quiet back to the full strength of the original groove.

It's an extra treat that *Follow the Red Line* allows Potter a long stretch for his outstanding sound on

bass clarinet. Bass clarinet is a doublers specialty, of course, and inevitably gets jazz fans thinking about Eric Dolphy. So it's wonderful to hear Underground place the oddball horn in a Rhodes-and-guitar pop ballad on "Zea" and then allow it to begin "Togo" in a Bennie Maupin vibe, muttering from its lower register as the rhythm section slowly picks up on the percussive groove. This last tune eventually gives way to a one-chord jam groove (and a burning tenor solo) that suggests how Potter's electric band ultimately converges with the likes of Medeski, Martin, and Wood on the one hand and class Sonny Rollins on the other.

The magic in *Red Line* is ultimately in the drama that each player brings to his solos, each of which builds like a scene from a Hitchcock film. Top honors, as so often, go to Taborn's versatile Rhodes playing. But they are Potter's fiendish tunes and his group conception. In a year that saw the passing of Michael Brecker, Potter seems to have emerged as a steely-toned tenor player who blends harmonic adventure with groove. It's not a question of talking about Potter as a Brecker successor—they're totally different players and, frankly, I think that Potter's range and imagination is wider. But it's a joy to hear this young master put a hard-edged, Breckeresque foot forward. Chris Potter, one of finest saxophone players in jazz today, has made a great record.

RATING: 

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