

# JAZZ IMPROV<sup>®</sup> Magazine

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## Skafish



**TIDINGS OF COMFORT AND JOY – A JAZZ PIANO CHRISTMAS.** La Befana Records #LB0001. www.labefanarecords.com P.O. Box 2972, East Chicago, IN 46312. *Joy to the World; Deck the Halls; The First Noel; It Came Upon A Midnight Clear; Silent Night; Hark! The Herald Angels Sing; O Come O Come Emmanuel; What Child Is This?; Angels We Have Heard on High; Away In A Manger; We Three Kings Fusion; God Rest Ye Merry Gents; Jingle Bells*

**PERSONNEL:** Jim Skafish, Piano; Lawrence Kohut, Upright Bass, Fretless Bass (on track 4), Electric Bass (on track 11); Tom Hipskind, Drums, Percussion

By Curtis Davenport

I must start this review with a bit of a confession: I absolutely love the Holiday Season and I am also passionate about Christmas music, especially Christmas Jazz. Ever since being exposed, as a child, to Vince Guaraldi's work on the timeless "Charlie Brown Christmas" Soundtrack and then to Ramsey Lewis' "The Sound of Christmas" a few years later, I have been absolutely hooked on the genre. I am one of those people who starts playing Dexter Gordon's "Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas" on Halloween night and I don't stop until New Year's Day, much to the irritation of my family!

That being said, you now have some idea how excited I was when I first encountered "Tidings of Comfort and Joy", which features jazz interpretations of thirteen Christmas classics. I also have to admit, that I didn't know exactly what to expect from the music on the disk when I then read a little about leader/pianist Jim Skafish's background. A Chicago native, Skafish was a leader of the Chicago punk, new wave, alternative and indie rock movements, back in the 70's and 80's. He was the first Chicago area artist to perform at the legendary (and recently closed) New York underground music shrine, CBGB and he toured or performed with such punk/new wave icons as The Ramones, Iggy Pop, The Stranglers and XTC. While I was a college student in New York during the heyday of these musical styles and stylists and very much aware of them, I must admit that I was not exactly a fan, so when I realized that we had an alternative music icon, performing jazz interpretations of beloved Christmas music, I felt that there was a lot of room for the proceedings to become a little bizarre, to say the least.

I now have to admit that my fears were completely unfounded. Jim Skafish has a solid jazz background that precedes his formidable alternative cred. His earliest compositions were, in fact, instrumental jazz. In high school, he formed a jazz trio and one of his piano teachers was Chicago area jazz legend Willie Pickens, who was the pianist for such notables as Eddie Harris and Elvin Jones. On "Tidings of Comfort and Joy", his trio is rounded out by two fine Chicago area jazz veterans, Lawrence Kohut on bass and Tom Hipskind on drums, so rest easy jazz fans, you will not have to slam dance your way through "Silent Night" to thoroughly enjoy this CD.

This is not however, a sleepy jazz Christmas disc either. It swings mightily, from the opening track, a finger-snapping rendition of "Joy to the World" through a reading of "Jingle Bells", which is driven by Hipskind's "Blakeyesque" back beat, with many brilliant stops in between. Skafish has clearly set out to make a disc that would be traditional in nature, but still have enough twists to keep the listeners on their collective toes and he has most certainly succeeded.

Other notable tracks are "O Come O Come Emmanuel", which reminded me a little of Eddie Harris' classic rendition of "Exodus"; the track is a tour de force for Skafish, whose piano is at turns dramatic, driving and swinging, all within the same 5 ½ minutes. "God Rest Ye Merry Gents" put me in good mood that lasted for hours. If you've never heard this usually staid old carol taken at a torrid pace, with a Boogie Woogie piano interlude in the middle, then you haven't heard anything. It is a toe tapping treat. The most ambitious piece is "We Three Kings Fusion" a ten minute rendition "We Three Kings of Orient Are" that shows Skafish still willing to take a few chances. The solo space for Kohut and Hipskind is relatively limited and that is my one very minor quibble, as I would have liked to have heard a little bit more from them.

"Tidings of Comfort and Joy", which Skafish released on his own La Befana Record label, is a disk that should find its way into the collections of fans of Christmas Carols and great piano trio jazz. I only hope that now that Jim Skafish has returned to his roots, he won't just stop here. After hearing their fresh takes on these Holiday standards, I would love to hear his creativity turned loose on some of the other non-seasonal standards as well. Hopefully, we will have that opportunity soon.