



## JOE LOVANO US FIVE

### BIRD SONGS

UK RELEASE DATE 21<sup>st</sup> March 2011 + UK TOUR

Friday 25 March LONDON Ronnie Scotts  
020 7439 0747 / [ronniescotts.co.uk](http://ronniescotts.co.uk)

Saturday 26 March GATESHEAD The Sage  
0191 443 4661 / [thesagegateshead.org](http://thesagegateshead.org)

Sunday 27 March SOUTHAMPTON Turner Sims  
023 8059 5151 / [turnersims.co.uk](http://turnersims.co.uk)

Tuesday 29 March BRISTOL St Georges  
0845 40 24 001 / [stgeorgesbristol.co.uk](http://stgeorgesbristol.co.uk)

**Masterful saxophonist announces *Bird Songs*, a brilliant tribute to the music of Charlie Parker, and UK tour with his vibrant, hugely acclaimed band US Five, featuring drummers Otis Brown III and Francisco Mela, bassist Esperanza Spalding, and pianist James Weidman.**

“I didn’t approach this as a tribute record,” states Joe Lovano, dispelling right off the bat any preconception that his new album ***Bird Songs***—an exploration of the Charlie Parker songbook—is a mere retread. Lovano’s 22<sup>nd</sup> album for Blue Note Records (the release of which will mark his 20<sup>th</sup> year on the label) breaks the mould of Bird tribute records. *Bird Songs* is a thrillingly adventurous, thoroughly modern, and uniquely personal look at one of the most influential figures in jazz history by one of the most important voices in the music today.

Us Five is the perfect vehicle for his exploration. Lovano’s dynamic young band—which features drummers Otis Brown III and Francisco Mela, bassist Esperanza Spalding, and pianist James Weidman—has been captivating audiences around the world for several years now. Their debut recording—2009’s *Folk Art*—was a wide-ranging set of Lovano’s original compositions that resulted in Us Five being awarded Best Small Ensemble of the Year at the 2010 JJA Jazz Awards and winning the Best Jazz Group of the Year category in the 2010 *DownBeat* Critics Poll. Lovano completed a double-triple of awards by also winning the JJA’s Musician and Tenor Saxophonist of the Year, and *DownBeat*’s Jazz Artist and Tenor Saxophonist of the Year.

“We’re trying to play from all these different points of reference,” Lovano says of Us Five. “We leave space for each other to contribute to the feeling of the music, building ideas from each other in a real spontaneous way. Everybody is leading and following, and there’s a lot of magic in that way of playing.”

One of the keys to approaching a project like *Bird Songs* for Lovano was to take Charlie Parker out of the museum and place him in a living, breathing continuum that reaches back to the musicians who had a deep impact on Bird’s development (Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Ben Webster), but also refracting Bird’s music through the musical prism of those he deeply impacted (John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Wayne Shorter). But most importantly, Lovano sought to personalize Bird’s music.

“I wasn’t trying to play like Charlie Parker at all,” Lovano explains. “I was playing from his influences, from where he was coming from, and from the influences of all these amazing cats who were his disciples. I wanted to focus on his incredible compositions, the themes, the harmonic structures, the forms of his tunes and try to open them up and turn them inside out in a way to create my own melodic and rhythmic variations. I wanted to create my own recording. You can’t tell someone else’s story.”

As with most young jazz musicians, Bird's music was a rite of passage for Lovano, whose own story began on alto saxophone before he switched to tenor as a teenager. "My dad heard Charlie Parker live in the late 40s and early 50s when he came through Cleveland," says Lovano, whose father Tony "Big T" Lovano was a saxophonist himself. "He had a lot of his recordings and treasured the moments that he heard Bird play, and spoke about it a lot. I was maybe two years old when Charlie Parker passed, but my dad's love for his playing and influence carried on for him and he gave that to me. To play Charlie Parker's music through the years, and study his melodies and lines taught me how to play the saxophone from the earliest age."

However, Lovano made a decision to not approach this music on Bird's main instrument. Eight of the album's eleven tracks—all songs either written by or associated with Parker—feature Lovano on his signature tenor saxophone, though he also performs one song each on straight alto ("Blues Collage"), his unique double-soprano horn the aulochrome ("Birdyard"), and in its recorded debut a G mezzo soprano ("Lover Man"). "For me the tenor saxophone is my voice," he explains. "I explore a lot of different horns within the woodwind family that fuel my ideas, but I wanted to really play this on tenor because that's who I am."

"Working with Bruce Lundvall through the years has been an incredible, joyous experience," says Lovano as he reflects upon his 20 years with Blue Note. "I've had the opportunity to document not only my development as an improviser and a composer, but relationships I've had through the years with all these amazing musicians on the scene. It's really about the community of people you live with and explore music with that make you the player you are. I've had this amazing last 20 years to be able to do that and create some music I'm really very proud of."

"Putting this recording together I kept wondering how Bird would have developed within these tunes, not just as the incredible soloist that he was but as an arranger and band leader. From what we know about him it is clear that he was into the world of music beyond so called Jazz and Be Bop and I'm sure we would have all been surprised at every turn in his approach just as we were with Miles, Coltrane, Sonny and Ornette, four of his most distinguished and celebrated disciples. At the young age of 34 Charlie Parker passed and left us with all of these questions about what would be. This recording is my humble attempt to answer some of those questions in my own way."

**For further information, images and interviews please contact**

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## **Bird Songs – About the music**

The idea for Bird Songs began to unfold over the past year after Us Five played a concert on Barbados for which Lovano introduced a special arrangement of the Parker blues “Barbados.” “That was kind of the springboard into this idea of focusing on Bird’s compositions. ‘Barbados’ has such an infectious theme, and we tried to really capture and keep a Caribbean feel throughout that piece.”

What’s most astounding about Bird Songs is that Lovano was able to delve into one of the most well-worn songbooks in Jazz and liberate each tune he approached from its standard interpretation. Typically performed as a bright, uptempo piece, “Donna Lee” is case in point: “That’s one of these tunes the title kind of suggests a way of playing it, and I’ve played it in that fashion my whole life. But I tried to turn it around, and I took those harmonies and I just slowed them down. I took a more Coleman Hawkins approach the way he played through ‘Body and Soul.’ For me Coleman Hawkins, The Hawk, was the first bird, and he influenced Bird a lot.”

“Moose the Mooche” is another Parker classic that Lovano interprets at a slower tempo, here also disassembling the melodic line and redistributing the pieces. “I took little parts of the inner theme, and I put it in a background part and let the rhythm section focus on a certain rhythmic motif. I slowed the tempo down and played with a much more funk groove influenced by the John Coltrane Quartet, where I could play the melody with interpretation. If you play that tune at a quicker tempo you almost have to play it a certain way, where by slowing it down I was free to express that melody in my own way and in my own feelings.”

“Ko Ko” becomes a stream-of-consciousness trio for Lovano, Brown, and Mela, with the two drummers implying different tempos throughout while Lovano improvises freely on the theme, breaking it apart into melodic shards. “We really improvise on this as the incredible and modern piece of music that it is,” he says.

“Blues Collage” is just that, a collage of three Parker blues arranged for a trio that features Lovano on straight alto. “Charlie Parker wrote an amazing amount of blues themes, and every one of them is a classic. So I just put three of them together: ‘Carvin the Bird’ which I play, ‘Bird Feathers’ which Esperanza Spalding focuses on, and ‘Bloomdido’ that James Weidman plays, and we just play this as little fugue within the three of us.”

“On ‘Dewey Square’ I feature the drums and we play it in a more Brazilian type feel,” Lovano says. “Within this band we have so many different influences from within the world of music and I tried to really capture that on this recording. These tunes of Bird’s were beautiful vehicles to do that with.”

“Yardbird Suite” appears on the album in two distinct versions. First as “Birdyard,” a piece that Lovano put together to feature the aulochrome. “I took a phrase from ‘Yardbird Suite’ and turned it into a kind of whirling dervish of sorts through five different keys and improvised on the aulochrome over that. It would have been incredible to hear Charlie Parker play that instrument and develop ideas within the possibilities of this horn.”

The version of “Yardbird Suite” that closes the album is the perfect summation of the spirit of adventure with which Lovano approached this project. “It came to me one day, I heard that melody as a hymn, as a spiritual, and I started to play it just by myself unaccompanied saxophone. And then I heard all these parts, added an interlude, and went into a 6/8 kind of a dance, and it turned out to be a really different exploration on that piece of music.”

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