

Shootout at the Marimba Chorale

Contributed by Larry Lawless
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After lunch, the slave driver cracks the whip again, and it's time for our next tune. This one is "Tone Down" by Bart Elliott, and presents some special challenges, because it is a standard head chart, where all we are given is a melody line with chord changes, and it's up to the performers to make a cohesive musical composition. This is typical of a jazz combo chart, but we have much arranging and working out of the structure to do for the recording. Bart based this piece on a famous Miles Davis chart, "Tune Up", but with the melody inverted, some chord substitutions and in 3/4 time instead of 4/4. Bart had wanted a very free introduction, with the vibraphone playing the melody very slowly and freely. We decide to add a "marimba chorale" with Doug and I rolling the chord tones on 2 marimbas underneath David's melody lines. This beautiful intro is followed by a short drumset solo by Bart that sets up the tempo and brings in the tune with Rich playing bass, letting Doug and David trade improvised solos based on the chord changes and melodic material of the melody.

With "Tone Down" finished, we move right into one of David Bugher's compositions, "Happy Thoughts". This starts with a frantic unison mallet line and cross triplet accents by the rhythm section into slower hits that set up a light samba. David says this composition (very nicely done under the pressure of having to write something for this group in an extremely short period of time) is just the result of his happy thoughts. Instrumentation is David on vibes, Doug on marimba 1, me on marimba 2, Bart on drums, Rich on bass. Towards the end there is an open drum solo that we decide to overdub a "samba school" onto. After the main recording is done, Kevin lowered the lights in the hall, dropped a ceiling mic to stage level, and we had great fun jamming on a variety of exotic percussion instruments, making five guys sound like 20.

The hours and the intensity of the recording process are wearing us down a bit, but as I told my wife in a phone call on a break, "we haven't come to blows ...yet". Now I know why so many bands break up after finishing a recording session.

A great time of fellowship at the Rio Grande mexican restaurant after the sessions are done, then to much needed rest before tomorrow.