

BRANFORD MARSALIS TRIO:

The Dark Keys (Columbia)

Rating: ****

By Josef Woodward

Branford Marsalis's segue into the life of network television and into the diluted pop music aesthetics of the Sting gig has always seemed like a tentative, half-hearted step. We always knew that, in his musical heart of hearts, he had a certain dark, deep secret (emphasis on deep): He had that burning urge to blow. And he can. And he does on *The Dark Keys*, an exciting return to the form of extended, freely structured improvisational impulse as practiced by Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane.

This is the side of Branford Marsalis that you never heard on NBC, in open-form trio pieces with his longtime collaborator, drummer Jeff "Watts" Tain, and bassist Reginald Veal. Starting with the 11-minute title track (whose melody nods to "A Love Supreme"), and continuing for a forceful hour of music, they present a strong trio identity that is the latest--and possibly best--in a series of Marsalis trio recordings that began with *Trio Jeepy* many moons ago.

The Marsalis brothers appear by proxy, as composers. Wynton M.'s "Hesitation" is a Monk-ish quirk of a tune, played by his saxophonic brother on soprano. On Delfayo Marsalis's minor blues "Judas Iscariot," Kenny Garrett joins the fray on alto sax, swapping friendly riff-fire with Marsalis. Tenor titan Joe Lovano puts in a cameo on "Sentinel," with both saxists engaging in more of a gruff, cool dialogue--shades of Albert Ayler in Lovano's solo--than a competitive cutting session. Continuing in the line of songs with "Tain" in the title, Watts's "Blutain" is a cockeyed blues with a simple, askew melody that lays sideways across Veal's walking bass.

Aside from the antic inventiveness and fluid rustle of his playing, Branford contributes fine, spare compositional frameworks. His own dark-keyed ballad "A Thousand Autumns" is as dusky beautiful as the closing "Schott Happens" is Rollins-esque blithe muscularity.

This is an album with no commercial interruptions or how-do-you-dos, and without a chordal chassis to govern the harmonic color palette. It's simply music about music, and about the warm, self-perpetuating wind that is the jazz spirit.