

STEPHEN SCOTT:

The Beautiful Thing (Verve)

Rating: ****

By *Tristram Lozaw*

Pianist Scott's take on jazz idioms is often so eclectic that he risks scattering his music's substantial impact. Here, his trio and guests run through a heap of styles as he mixes six originals with another half-dozen twists of jazz classics.

The brash, free-exploring peaks "After Thoughts And Reflections" collide into a section straight outta Weather Report. Bright sax solos burst out of the too-easy funk-fusion in "The Heretic." The moods of Wayne Shorter's "Oriental Folk Song" swing in and out of overdrive with remarkable clarity. Scott also runs through smoky cool riffs, smooth bossa nova and crafty Ornette Coleman bop.

But if mixing styles is the game, this maturing young lion (he's 27) can play varsity. He was Betty Carter's pianist at 18, worked with Joe Henderson on *Lush Life* and tours with Sonny Rollins, among others. And Scott is able to keep the diverse, neo-bop feast in line with the sublime, bubbling drift of his piano.

An understated soloist with a surprise always lurking in the next bar, he'll launch a densely buoyant legato over the headiest sections and quickly recover to capture the romantic charisma of a delicate roll. Meanwhile, Scott's harmonic clusters are colorful enough to elevate his less-inventive melodies. He even makes "I Love Lucy" sound like a rediscovered classic ballad.

Scott's eclectic mind-set enables his trio to meld effortlessly with saxmen Branford Marsalis, Kenny Garrett, Ron Blake and Jesse Davis, guitarist Russell Malone and percussionist Steve Kroon. But it's Scott's gorgeously brooding and percolating solos that really let *The Beautiful Thing* live up to its title.