

## AARON J. JOHNSON—*Songs of Our Fathers* (2009)—Reviews



**Track Listing:** A Fuller Life; The Message; Cannonball; So Long/I Can Wait; Folk Forms; Reconstruction (Minus 1); Yes, You May; Big Fun Blues; Shamba; Our Thing.

**Personnel:** Aaron J. Johnson: trombone, shells; Salim Washington: tenor sax, flute, oboe; Onaje Allan Gumbs: piano; Victor Lewis: drums; Robert Sabin: bass.

Ejazznews.com

If you favor Hard Bop jazz, funky grooves, and a touch of the blues with a focus on melodies and a good measure of swing, then “Songs of Our Fathers” is a must for your collection. Trombonist Aaron J. Johnson comes out swinging with a very impressive debut dedicated to his father and past masters of the music. A versatile musician, Johnson has previously recorded as a sideman on the trombone, bass clarinet and conch shells.

On this recording he sticks to the trombone and plays sparingly on the shells. But this recording excels not so much for his play on the instruments but for his talents as a composer for his nine originals are just masterful. There is only one standard here and that is the blue-chip “Our Thing” borrowed from the great Joe Henderson. Joining Johnson on this first effort as leader are Salim Washington on tenor, flute and oboe, renowned drummer Victor Lewis, Onaje Allan Gumbs on the piano and Robert Sabin on bass.

The highlights on this recording are many and one that stands out is the fast-paced hard bop opener “A Fuller Life” blessed by sizzling solos from Washington, Johnson, Gumbs and a Lewis rumbling drum roll. Another winner is the light melody-rich “So Long/ I Can Wait” at eleven -minutes plus, this one is real good and features the leader on the shells following a blazing tenor phrasing from Salim.

The coolest number on this album has to be Johnson's “Shamba,” possessing a slow-burning irresistible groove that will have you tapping your toes and moving you shoulders to the rhythm of the music—superb composition. Other tunes to look out for are “The Message,” “Big Fun Blues” and the swinging rendition to Henderson's “Our Thing.” Without reservation, Aaron J. Johnson's recording debut with “Songs of Our Fathers” is definitely an attention grabber and perhaps one of the better release of the year

—Edward Blanco

*This is one of the best CD's I've heard in a long time.*

*Maxx Myrick  
President  
MaxxJazzHouse*

*“Here is a real jazz gem, reminiscent of some of great performances from the 1960's . Aaron Johnson, trombone, and Salim Washington, tenor sax and other woodwinds, are jazz voices at the top of their games.”*

*-Stan Pethel*

Johnson's music is set in mainstream jazz abetted by the blues. The music has a deep emotional core which gives his role as a composer a continued presence. He is also sharp as a tack and imaginative when it comes to playing the trombone, turning rhythm into an often irresistible presence.

Johnson shapes his approach on the charge of "A Fuller Life." He gives the first breath to the bop pulse one that is then essayed by Salim Washington whose tenor sax is fiery yet controlled. The manifestation of the composition opens the door to a variety of impulses from Onaje Allan Gumbs (piano) and Victor Lewis (drums). Both have long brought individual perspective to several bands and they do so once again.

"Big Fun Blues" lives up to its name. The melody is instant and both Johnson and Washington saturate in it. The projection is lively and sparkling, and downright entertaining. The blues is reshaped on "Cannonball," a funeral atmosphere turned into a funky, slightly blustery excursion. Johnson bounces around on the trombone as Washington flips on to the flute, his notes dizzyingly airy.

"Shamba" flips the mood. A funereal blues deliberated by Robert Sabin on the bass, it gets into a melancholy stream. The band, tight and coiled as it is, also has a spring in its movement.

Johnson makes a strong debut with music that is earthy and has a tale to tell.

—Jerry D'Souza

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Audiophile Audition—"A brilliant release that deserves your attention"

One of the joys of reviewing jazz CDs from small, independent recording labels is coming across a gem, opening the shell and finding a flawless pearl. Such is the case with *Songs of Our Fathers* by the relatively unknown trombonist, Aaron J Johnson, who hails from Washington D.C. Johnson's CD swings like mad. His blending with tenor saxophonist, Salim Washington, brings to mind the best of the early Jazz Crusaders, where Wilton Felder on sax had the uncanny ability to meld with trombonist, Wayne Henderson. On *Songs of Our Fathers*, we once again have the pleasure of the two instrumentalists blending their talents to play hard bop, soul jazz, and blues.

For nearly seventy-eight minutes, we are treated to nine original compositions of Johnson, plus Joe Henderson's, *Our Thing*. Aaron's writing has the maturity of a well-seasoned composer. It is a bit of a shock that Johnson has not made more of a stir across the country, as there is not a weak track on this CD - no filler whatsoever. Johnson dedicates this release to his father, and to honored jazz masters such as Cannonball Adderley and to Curtis Fuller (I'm guessing here as the opening song is named, *A Fuller Life*.) This track has a real Jazz Crusaders feel as Johnson and Washington take right off. Johnson has a strong solo, as does pianist Gumbs. Veteran drummer, Victor Lewis, also has a major solo before the chorus reappears.

*The Message* follows and has a pleasant groove with its infectious melody. Washington's solo is soul personified. Cannonball has a gutbucket trombone intro leading into a soul jazz idiom. The longest track on the CD, *So Long / I Can Wait*, leads off with Gumbs and then bassist Sabin shining and Johnson bringing shells into the mix. Salim Washington takes his tenor into passionate territory flitting with outside choruses, before Johnson's shells bring an exotic aura to the tune. *Folk Forms* has a march vibe and you can imagine the band making a grand entrance into a parade.

The rest of the tracks continue the soulful romp, each having musical treats in store for the listener. *Shamba* with its horn blend and Lewis' cymbal mastery and Gumbs comping is quite special. Joe Henderson's *Our Thing* closes out proceedings at fast paced clip and Salim Washington burns.

Aaron J Washington deserves major airplay on jazz radio with this new release. I would not be surprised to find *Songs of Our Fathers* on my best of 2009 list. A well deserved five-star rating.

—Jeff Krow