

BOXED SET



Passion Flower (for Doris Duke)
Joe Castro (Clover-Sunnyside)
by Scott Yanow

Pianist Joe Castro (1927-2009) is today best remembered for recording two albums for Atlantic (1956's *Mood Jazz* and 1959's *Groove Funk Soul*) and working with tenor saxophonist Teddy Edwards. However there was much more to his musical life than that relatively brief period, as the liner notes for the six-CD Sunnyside set *Passion Flower* (and the previous *Lush Life*) reveal. A professional musician by the time he was 15, Castro served in the Army during 1946-47 and then formed a trio that spent time working in Hawaii. Influenced by Bud Powell, Castro gradually developed his own bop-oriented style. After he met Doris Duke (one of the richest women in the world) in 1952, they had a 13-year relationship. At her homes in Beverly Hills and New York, Castro hosted allstar jam sessions, much of which was recorded but unreleased until recently.

In the late '50s, Castro worked in L.A. both with Edward's quartet and bassist Leroy Vinnegar's trio.

He also was an accompanist to Anita O'Day, June Christy and Tony Martin. In 1963, he and Duke started Clover Records. Several albums were recorded but all that was released was 1965's *Lush Life* and a few singles. In 1966 both their relationship and the label were finished. Strangely enough Castro made no further recordings (although a cassette with O'Day in 1985 later came out) despite being active for another 43 years. The pianist worked in Vegas, most notably as the musical director for the Tropicana Hotel's Folies Bergère for quite a few years and he was happily married from 1967 until his wife's passing in 2008.

The 2019 Sunnyside six-CD set *Lush Life - A Musical Journey* consisted entirely of previously unreleased performances from 1954-66, including a complete disc dedicated to Teddy Wilson (highlighted by a wonderful quartet session with Stan Getz) in which Castro does not appear. The more recent *Passion Flower - For Doris Duke* is also comprised of six CDs; most of the music is making its first appearance.

The first disc features Castro during 1955-56 at the head of trios with either Vinnegar, Red Mitchell or Paul Chambers on bass and Jimmy Pratt, Lawrence Marable or Philly Joe Jones on drums. This CD serves as an ideal place to get introduced to Castro's playing. As on *Lush Life*, Castro does not appear on the second disc. Pianist Paul Bley is featured on five solo numbers and five with a trio from 1956 when he was a fine boppish player who had not yet formed his own style. Also on this disc are eight numbers featuring singer Flo Handy, her husband pianist George Handy and, on three songs, an orchestra. These art songs are difficult to sit through, a bit pompous and easily the low point of this release.

The third CD brings back Castro's *Mood Jazz*

album. The leader is featured while accompanied by the Ray Ellis Orchestra and Voices, the Neal Hefti String Orchestra or the Neal Hefti Singers. While this project does not seem too promising on the surface, Castro flourishes in these settings with strings and voices and on a few numbers he is joined by Cannonball and Nat Adderley. The original album is augmented by two additional songs plus four alternate takes. The *Groove Funk Soul* album returns on the fourth disc. This is a much more freewheeling session, Castro with what was really the Edwards Quartet, which also includes Vinnegar and drummer Billy Higgins. The original six numbers are joined by four previously unreleased performances: two other songs and two alternates. While Castro plays quite well, Edwards often steals the show with his inventive playing and big tenor sound.

The final two discs jump to 1965-66 and mostly have Castro playing with bassist Teddy Kotick and drummer Paul Motian. The fifth CD features the trio performing nine standards, a Johnny Hodges blues and one original. The final disc showcases the trio by themselves on three numbers, becoming a quartet with Edwards on "Just Squeeze Me" and playing four songs in which they are joined by six horns (the Bob Cooper Ensemble) arranged by the pianist. The final two performances on this box ("Passion Flower" and "Remind Me") have Castro and the trio interacting with another pianist, possibly Duke herself.

While there is a great deal of rewarding music on *Passion Flower* and *Lush Life*, one hopes that Sunnyside will eventually put together a third Castro set, one that includes the elusive *Lush Life* Clover album along with more unheard gems.

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