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Critics' Choice

By NATE CHINEN, BEN RATLIFF, KELEFA SANNEH and JON PARELES
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WILLIE JONES III

“Volume III” (WJ3 Records)

The drummer Willie Jones III has a clean technique, a precise approach to tempo and a light yet locomotive feel. He comes from a line of percussive descent established by Kenny Clark, and later modified by Philly Joe Jones; he's more than comfortable with polyrhythm, but it's straightforward swing that suits him best.

As a bandleader Mr. Jones is similarly crisp and direct, as he demonstrates on his third album. Working mainly with a trio — Eric Reed on piano and Dwayne Burno on bass — he presents a well-balanced program with a smart emphasis on unworn tunes like “Shoulders,” by Cedar Walton, and “Wail Bait,” by Quincy Jones.

The album's star, and not just by default, is Mr. Reed, whose pristine articulation makes him the right man for this job. His command feels effortless, even when — as on McCoy Tyner's “Inception” — the ensemble reaches for something stormy. When Mr. Jones takes over at the piano (on two tracks that also sub in the bassist Mike Elizondo), he can't help but sound slightly labored by comparison. NATE CHINEN