

contemporary hipness—and doesn't always find the sweet spots in the middle.

Maybe next time, more unexpected material and elements of surprise would spice up the Willie & Wynton Lone Star gumbo. For now, it's only as strong as the sum of its impressive parts. **JOSEF WOODARD**

## JASON AJEMIAN

*The Art of Dying* (Delmark)



There's an alluringly schizoid quality to this solo effort by Chicago Underground bassist Jason Ajemian. At the core of the session is his trio

Smokeless Heat, with tenor saxophonist Tim Haldeman and drummer Noritaka Tanaka. But the group grows to include Jaimie Branch on trumpet, Matt Schneider on guitar and Jason Adasiewicz on marimba. You could call them "guests," but Ajemian doesn't, as they're too central to the music's architecture.

Ajemian has the soul of an avant-gardist, but the first piece on *The Art of Dying*, apart from a few jutting harmonic angles, wouldn't sound wildly out of place on a Kenny Burrell album. Titled "With or Without the Universalator (Birdie's Dream)," it's a tuneful major-key ballad by Schneider, establishing an aura of classic jazz that returns on two Haldeman tunes, the darkly hued waltz "Sackett's Harbor" and the sparse ballad "Manisia Lynn." Yet the cross-layered rhythms and repetitive motifs of Jon Bangs' "9 Car" suggest an altogether different sound world.

The bulk of the music is Ajemian's, and it ranges from the stalking slow-rock tempo and distant vocal groans of "Machine Gun Operator" to the straight-up burning trio swing of "Your Shirts." The narrative arc of "U're the Guy (Keith Wood)" involves shifts from free-jazz interplay to tight walking bass, ending with a crystal-clear thematic statement from tenor and trumpet.

Strangely, there are four chamber-jazz vignettes, averaging 20 seconds in length, sprinkled through the playlist and bearing the titles "The," "Art," "Of," "Dying." Between these tiny whispers and the untitled, 24-minute trio improvisation that closes the disc, we get the full measure of Smokeless Heat's expressive range. **DAVID R. ADLER**