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ALEX HUTTON TRIO, SONGS FROM THE SEVEN HILLS

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Alex Hutton is a British pianist who once received the rare accolade of a generous tribute from the late Ronnie Scott - but since Scott died in 1996 and this is only Hutton's second album, it's evident that his career didn't boom. But Hutton went to study in New York in 1994, toured with the soul/jazz band Boy On a Dolphin, and then kept his head down in the UK as a sideman for anybody and everybody, including Jim Mullen, Guy Barker and Gilad Atzmon. Like *Cross That Bridge*, *Songs from the Seven Hills* has a narrative design rather than just being a string of tunes, and in this case it addresses the pianist's roots in the landscapes of his native Yorkshire (it's subtitled *The Sheffield Suite*), the punk-folk of the *Strangers*, regular piano jazz, and English classical music. Though the leader is sometimes a little over-tempted in his solos by the descending triplet figures of McCoy Tyner, and a country-gospelly roll reminiscent of early Keith Jarrett colours his slow pieces, Hutton does justify Scott's faith in a scattering of improvisations that join an affectingly hooky melodic knack to a rich and freewheeling impressionism as his speculations open out.

Hutton often favours the Esbjörn Svensson method of broaching a simple melody and progressively and hypnotically thickening it, and he's aided in this by the alert drumming of Enzo Zirilli and the dynamic bass-playing of expat American Michael Janisch. Janisch is Scott LaFaro-like in his countermelodic exchanges with Hutton on the initially spacey *Surprise Corner*, and his bowed playing is majestic on the tumbling, bell-pealing *Seventh Hill*. Hutton gets rhapsodic and Jarrett-like on the finale. It's a set that will stand high among UK jazz achievements at the year's end.