mack avenue
MUSIC GROUP

Yellowjackets
Fasten Up

Well into their fourth decade as a band, **Yellowjackets** show no signs of slowing down. Very much the opposite, in fact – as implied by the title of their latest release, ***Fasten Up***, the 27th album of the quartet's storied career and their seventh for **Mack Avenue Records**. The curious turn of phrase, taken from the exhilarating title tune by bassist **Dane Alderson**, embraces the band's ethos of unbridled momentum while carrying the suggestion of cautionary warning: brace yourself, fasten those seatbelts, Yellowjackets are back and the pedal's to the metal.

The spirit of forward motion that has propelled Yellowjackets throughout the band's history has less to do with the tempo of the songs themselves – which, as ever, make up a vibrant blend of styles and influences – but with their commitment to exploration and renewal. Those ideas are reflected in the band's lineup, which features founding pianist/keyboardist **Russell Ferrante**; drummer **Will Kennedy**, whose second tenure in the band (starting in 2010) has now surpassed his first (1987-1999); saxophonist **Bob Mintzer**, who came on board in 1990; and the Australian-born Alderson, who will celebrate his first decade as a 'Jacket alongside the release of *Fasten Up*.

Yellowjackets released their eponymous debut album in 1981 at the height of the fusion era. Since then they've adhered to fusion's genre-blurring mentality while refusing to remain tied to any single style or era. Drawing upon a history-spanning mélange of jazz movements, steeped in funk grooves and chamber music sophistication, and always keeping an ear to the ground for new sounds and technologies, Yellowjackets have evolved to become a genre unto themselves.

"What we're about is a quest for self-discovery," defines Ferrante. "We're constantly figuring out who we are, continuing our journey and evolution while challenging ourselves along the way. The more we play, the closer we get to realizing the ideal of four guys totally losing themselves and making one unified sound."

Adds Mintzer, "When I write songs for Yellowjackets, I'm attempting to create an environment in which we can do what this band does. Somewhat selfishly, we're all about just getting together to play. Yellowjackets is all-encompassing; we appreciate chamber music, R&B, gospel, straightahead jazz, in such a way that it's hard to pinpoint the prevailing influence. We have an identifiable sound, but it

keeps evolving based on the way we write as a vehicle for the way we'd like to play together."

Kennedy credits their ability to balance tradition and invention to the unique position the band finds itself in. "Being around for over 40 years, that's a small club to belong to," the drummer says.

"There's a reflective perspective baked into that. We have a history that we can look back on, with a lot of fun, a lot of challenges, and a lot of change. The music industry continues to evolve around us, and we feel honored to still be here and still be in the game as viable contributors after all this time."

Any doubts about Yellowjackets' continued viability will be instantly dispelled as Kennedy's whipcrack drums launch the band into their distinctively elastic take on "Comin' Home Baby." Penned by bassist Ben Tucker in the early '60s, with lyrics added later by Bob Dorough, the song has become a perennial, recorded by everyone from Herbie Mann to Mel Tormé, Quincy Jones to Michael Bublé. Mintzer's arrangement, doubling the melody on tenor and EWI, instantly transforms the familiar chestnut into a Yellowjackets vehicle.

Alderson's title tune follows, built upon a bustling groove inspired by the infectious rhythms of Dave Weckl and Herbie Hancock's *Thrust*, which also led the composer to give his Precision Bass a workout. "It's a fun party tune," the bassist says. "I love tunes that are fun to jam on and that have unexpected drum grooves. The Headhunters and *Thrust* were always big influences on me, so I specifically used the P-Bass because that was the sound I was going for."

Mintzer's "Will Power" was also built from the rhythmic foundation up. The title is a nod to Kennedy, who sent a recording of the basic beat to his bandmates and caught the saxophonist's ear. "The search for unusual rhythmic patterns is never-ending," Kennedy says. "As a musician as in any profession, if you remain stagnant then it's all downhill from that point on."

In keeping with the drum-oriented theme, Ferrante's "November 8th" doesn't acknowledge any significant anniversary (though you can associate any number of historic events on that date, from the Stockholm Bloodbath of 1520 to John F. Kennedy's election in 1960), but the song's disorienting 11/8 time signature. The keyboardist also contributes the lovely, wistful ballad "The Truth of You," its melody as indelible and timeless as its title.

Guitarist and singer-songwriter **Raul Midón** makes a special guest appearance on "The Lion," layering his wordless vocal into Ferrante's upbeat melody and deftly weaving his guitar lines into the band's lively sound. "Adding his voice definitely brought out the melody," Ferrante says, "and I was so impressed by how he folded his guitar part into the song. One of Raul's many strengths is his

incredible groove, and really found the space to integrate his guitar while moving the tune forward rhythmically."

The first of three tunes in a row by Mintzer, "Swingmeister General" recalls a turn of phrase in frequent use during the saxophonist's days working with the late bass virtuoso Jaco Pastorius while capturing the bold swing foundation of the tune. It's followed by "An Interesting Dream," which stemmed from a nighttime vision of playing lead trumpet in a big band, and "Broken," which references both the piece's staggered time feel and, more obliquely, the general state of the world in these turbulent times.

A similar sense of uncertainty pervades Ferrante's foreboding "An Unresolved Question." Alderson's jittering, electronica-influenced "Xemeris" closes the album on a forward-looking note, fusing acoustic instruments and MIDI programming under the influence of artists like Aphex Twin and Squarepusher. The title, which simultaneously suggests ancient Greek history or far-flung astronomical bodies (and, by sheer coincidence, is an anagram for "remixes") was invented by Alderson, its ultimate meaning left ambiguous.

There is a communal joy that invigorates all of the music that Yellowjackets create. The thrill of group discovery bristles through the muscular funk grooves, deepens the emotion of the ballads, and digs deep to unearth the roots of the band's bracing sense of swing. On *Fasten Up*, their rich history remains in focus in the rearview mirror as they accelerate into the future.