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Music Review: Kevin Eubanks - *Zen Food*

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Author: [The Other Chad](#) Published: Nov 19, 2010 at 3:40 pm

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Kevin Eubanks replaced Branford Marsalis as the leader of *The Tonight Show* Band back in 1995. He held the position right up through 2010, stepping down at the end of May. His easy going nature and good humor made him a strong asset to *The Tonight Show*. Bantering with host Jay Leno night after night, he achieved a high degree of name recognition over the years. Eubanks presumably hopes that popularity will follow him with the release of *Zen Food*, his Mack Avenue Records debut.

Eubanks was an established jazz guitarist long before his time on *The Tonight Show*, both as a sideman and bandleader. His debut album, bearing the minimalist title *Guitarist*, was released in 1982. He recorded sporadically during his time on late night television, but *Zen Food* marks a "not so foreign" new chapter for Eubanks. He's back to being a composer and recording artist. "That's all I used to do," Eubanks emphasizes in the album's press notes, "Musically I'm at a different level, as well as personally."

Leading a quintet through mostly original tunes, Eubanks favors a slow, simmering build with plenty of room for his musicians to stretch out. "The Dancing Sea" opens the set with a killer riff that serves as the foundation for an increasingly intense performance. It's an exciting way to kick off the album. "The Dirty Monk" epitomizes the slow-burn feel of much of the album, beginning with some laid back guitar work. One of the lengthier tracks, it escalates to a frenzied full band jam. Gerry Etkins contributes some impressive keyboard soloing.



"6/8," the title referring to the tune's time signature, spotlights the hypnotic bass playing of [Rene Camacho](#). [Bill Pierce](#) works up a sweat on tenor sax before tossing it to Eubanks. His fluid, lightning-quick runs makes this possibly his finest solo on the album. Near the end of "6/8," Marvin "Smitty" Smith's drum solo helps lead the band into overdrive for a funky finale. At the other end of the spectrum is "Adoration," an acoustic guitar and keyboard duet boasting the record's most gentle and melodic moments.

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My name is actually Chaz. Well, Charles. But people call me Chaz. Except for one former co-worker, Dave, who thought my name was Chad. Dave and I worked with a guy who's name really was Chad. So Dave habitually called me the "other Chad."

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Zen Food

Release date: 2010-11-22

Publisher: Mack Avenue

Guitarist Kevin Eubanks held one of the most coveted chairs in television for nearly 18 years as the leader of The Tonight Show Band, when his muse struck and prompted him to take his axe and move on. ...



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At times there's too much aimless noodling on tracks that never really take off. "Offering" is one such example, though its meditative feel gives it a promising beginning. Unfortunately the track limply drags along, without much spark between the musicians. "I Remember Loving You" similarly never develops into anything more interesting than moody atmospheric. Keyboardist Gerry Etkins contributed "G.G." (the only non-Eubanks tune), and it's frankly a bit of a monotonous bore.

Another problem is the actual sound of the album. The mix is a bit muddy at times, with the drums and percussion lacking definition. Marvin Smith's excellent work deserves more prominence in the overall sound. I can't quite place my finger on it, but the recording seems to lack punch. On the more frenetic numbers in particular, the instruments seem to blend together in an uncomfortable morass.

Thankfully *Zen Food* manages to mostly rise above those issues, due to the strength of the musicianship. Eubanks, of course, is front and center but all the players get a chance to shine. Gear endorsements are listed for each musician, not at all uncommon (especially with jazz albums). However, interestingly enough the title of the album itself is an endorsement. [Z.E.N. Foods](#), a Los Angeles-based health food delivery service, receives a special thanks in the liner notes. Eubanks is a nutrition nut and obviously thinks quite highly of Z.E.N.'s product, calling it "the greatest food in the world." While of course food is nutrition for the body, he sees music as nutrition for the soul. This concept lends *Zen Food* a neat double meaning.

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