Travel Notes, the seventh album by the Western Michigan University Jazz Orchestra, is much like the first half-dozen: big-band jazz whose design and performance are as consistently strong and artistic as one can envision at any level. Tom Knific, WMU's director of Jazz Studies since 2000, has a keen ear for engaging songs, one of which is his own sunny composition, "That Day in May," sandwiched nicely between a pair of themes by bassist John Clayton — the tasteful, well-grooved opener, "Blues for Stephanie," and robust, gospel-flavored "Reverence."

Rounding out the impressive studio date are trumpeter Tim Hagans' "Passing Giants" and a brace of evocative tunes by Israeli-born pianist Alon Yavnai, "Travel Notes" and "Spring Fever." Soloists are sharp and resourceful, especially trumpeter Jon Ailabouni who is showcased on "Reverence" and the pensive "Passing Giants." Ailabouni, guitarist Bryan Blowers, tenor Blake Cross and pianist Mark Niskanen strengthen the cause on "Stephanie," Blowers, bassist Andrew Rose and tenor Dominic Carioti on "May," Niskanen, Ailabouni, Carioti (soprano) and drummer Christian Euman on "Notes," alto Michael Hudson-Casanova, baritone Marcus Johnson and bass trombonist Aaron Buczek on "Fever."

Even so, it is the orchestra as a whole that carries the day, showing why it is a three-time winner as Best Big Band in DownBeat magazine's annual student music competition and has earned twenty-five consecutive Outstanding Big Band awards at the Notre Dame Intercollegiate Jazz Festival. Brass and reeds are remarkably tight and perceptive, while the rhythm section never misses a beat. If, as some say, it is the ballads that separate the winners from the also-rans, "Passing Giants" shows clearly why WMU is at the head of its class.

From start to finish, Travel Notes is an explicit model of superior big-band jazz. If there is a downside, it lies in the album's modest forty-five minute playing time. Aside from that, there's nothing to reprove.

Track Listing: Blues for Stephanie; That Day in May; Reverence; Travel Notes; Passing Giants; Spring Fever.
Personnel: Tom Knific: music director; Curtis James: trumpet; Paul Hardaker: trumpet; Jon Ailabouni: trumpet; Elliot Bild: trumpet; Marshall Werling: trumpet; Lasse Grunewald: alto sax; Michael Hudson-Casanova: alto sax; Dominic Carioti: tenor, soprano sax; Blake Cross: tenor sax; Marcus Johnson: baritone
sax; Luke Marlowe: trombone; Andrew Stutzman: trombone; Becky Haines: trombone; Austin John Muusse: trombone; Aaron Buczek: bass trombone; Mark Niskanen: piano; Bryan Blowers: guitar; Andrew Rose: bass; Christian Euman: drums.

Record Label: Blujazz Productions