

Joey Alexander: *Warna* (Verve)

A review of the 16-year-old pianist's first album on Verve

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Hard to believe that after all of Joey Alexander's accolades at the tender age of 16—Grammy nominations, a Grand Prix at the Master-Jam Fest, and a personal Jazz at Lincoln Center invite from Wynton Marsalis—he's done it all (and more) without a major-label deal. *Warna* ("color" in Alexander's native Bahasa Indonesian) finds him, for the first time, in fine historic company on Verve. And the music? It's proceeding with nary a hiccup.

Youth propels the pianist, to be sure, but he's hardly a slick trickster or a Warp Nine showoff. Writing 10 of 12 tracks here (with Sting's "Fragile" and Joe Henderson's "Inner Urge" thrown in), he distinguishes himself as before, first through simple, elegantly stated figures, then through lively and deep variation (more harmonic than rhythmic) on each.

With due kudos to the man in charge, this album belongs to all who play on it. Bassist Larry Grenadier never fails to deepen and enrich Alexander's left hand. Drummer Kendrick Scott treats empty space as a tidepool, stirring his sticks to find a variety of rhythmic life in every go-round. Guest percussionist Luisito Quintero sticks steadfastly to Scott until they sound like one man with four hands. The other guest, flutist Anne Drummond, adds a bracing cold-spring ambience to two tracks. A tad jarring compared to the easy familiarity of the other four, but another intriguing direction of which I would have liked to hear more.

This album will get plenty of hype; Alexander's age and seemingly instant cred guarantee nothing less. I was pleasantly surprised, though, by the richness in restraint and the intuitive mastery of space and silence—from everyone.