



## Michael Mason and the Exploratory Ensemble

### Angels Of Fire

(Blue Thumb)

> by John Barrett

In 1958, fire struck Our Lady of the Angels school in Chicago - so severe that it changed national fire laws. Michael Mason survived the tragedy; he now prevents others as a firefighter, and he blows a strong flute. His latest disc is a memorial, depicting fire in its various aspects. On the whole it succeeds: the music is fierce, driving, impulsive - and very hot.

You hear a series of vignettes: synthesizer mood pieces followed by excursions for flute. The keyboards are plain and soon forgotten; the horn blows fury from a dozen directions. And he has help: two basses for extra depth, lots of percussion, and big tenor from Ernest Dawkins. "Courage" is carefree, and "The Light, The Heat" unfolds with growing power. Mason shouts in overblown clusters (an influence is Ian Anderson,) balanced by a breezy trombone. Like their inspiration, these tracks flare up, and the atmosphere spreads wide.

Near the end the experiments begin. "Youth" dances in a spritely 5/4, a happy flute as drums collide. ("Flame Front" does it one better, veering between 12/8 and 9/8!) "Brotherhood" gives the theme to Irish pipes, a folk thread running through the jazz fury. And "Children's Song" leaves us with optimism, gentle piano and bright little hums. This is the future - one where children fear no danger - and it sounds good.

From JazzUSA

Short Takes - April 2000