

POPMATTERS

May 15, 2009

Will Layman, Reviewer

QUIET JOY

Here is an unknown singer out of the California Bay Area. Unknown musicians, too. Small label. The cover photo is of the leader in her backyard garden, suggesting a homemade production. Uh-oh.

But from the first notes of Quiet Joy, my trepidation was dashed. Lee, -a pianist and guitarist first who discovered her voice later, -sings with musicianly clarity and drive, a bit like a bossa-nova-savvy, female Mel Torme. Like Torme, Lee, 's voice is pleasing, precise and clean but also capable of moving through an arrangement like a brilliantly played alto saxophone. On "I Hear Music", she dazzles with boppish syncopations and daring melodic turns, some sung in unison with her guitarist Peter Sprague. It's special to be dazzled by Lee in large part because her voice has a gorgeous undersung quality that she likely learned from her obvious romance with Brazilian music; Jennifer Lee isn't all about dazzling you ... then she does.

Half the tunes here are bossa novas, often delivered in convincing Portuguese, and all delivered with a rhythmically precise form of relaxation. Like Elias, Lee does a neat job of converting a standard, "S Wonderful" into a samba groove, and she also serves up bossas that are less than familiar. Unlike Elias, Lee does not immediately sound like the great bossa singers. Her tone is bright but typically light on vibrato, bringing to mind the "cleaner" band singers of the 1950s but with a keen knowledge of all the hip melodic dodges and killer rhythmic displacements from bebop singing. Because she plays her own rhythm guitar or piano, perhaps, she seems deeply in-sync with her band.

And when Lee tackles a familiar standard like "Pennies from Heaven" she nails it with effortless swing and sparkle. Her second chorus of the melody, as is custom, contains embellishments of the original melody, each of which manages to be simultaneously surprising and dead-in-the-pocket. Neither rehearsed-sounding nor slick, this is still jazz singing that avoids seeming pointlessly tricky. Her wedding of "On a Clear Day" and "Never Never Land" is similarly balanced, -dramatic without seeming theatrical, and

jennifer lee

vocalist • pianist • guitarist

sensitive but not maudlin. And her piano solo and accompaniment (and her arrangement) also strike a stirring balance.

Cap it off with this: Jennifer Lee writes her own sharp and soaring tunes. “You Knew” has a winding melody framed by a hip little figure and a great set of changes for solos. “Quiet Joy” is a wordless bossa that seems to move on a gentle breeze above the band. Quiet Joy, as a collection, begged me to overlook it, but I’m thrilled that I didn’t.

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