

THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD REVIEW OF *blesSINGS* - NORA McCARTHY PEOPLE OF PEACE QUINTET

Nora McCarthy/The People of Peace Quintet (Red Zen)

By Donald Elfman

Walking into Cornelia Street Café last month for vocalist Nora McCarthy's CD release celebration of *blesSINGS*, there was a positive vibe to the proceedings, a spirit that informs the new CD and, it seems, everything McCarthy does.

blesSINGS draws on a variety of traditions, including soul, R&B and avant garde jazz. The ethos of the recording is most clearly reflected on the opener, "Love Poem for the People", with lyrics by late poet James Akinwale Daniels conveyed by McCarthy's smoky voice.

The ensemble—Jorge Sylvester (alto saxophone), Pablo Vergara (piano), Donald Nicks (electric bass) and Kenny Grohowski (drums)—deftly colors McCarthy's work as well as presenting distinctive personalities.

On Sylvester's "Akara Moi Moi", McCarthy scats over pulsing changes and rhythm. McCarthy wrote four of the compositions and most of the lyrics, including for songs by some of the masters of the music. One of the pleasures of the album is hearing how McCarthy negotiates the lyrics she's written and how she integrates them into the overall sound. She laughingly suggested at the release concert that Ornette Coleman is "not gone but rather looking lovingly at all of us." She then performed his "The Blessing", infused with loving lyrics and graceful wordless vocalizing, which led into passionate and harmonically apposite solos by Sylvester, Vergara and electric bassist Gene Torres, subbing for Nicks. And then came a ritualistic "Passion Dance", a McCoy Tyner gem, with fiery burning rhythmic intros from piano, bass and drums and then horn-like, rapid-fire singing and joyous scatting.

The album, seven tunes of which made up the CD release concert, closes with mysterious sounds introducing "Nowhere Ever After" by Butch Morris. McCarthy's lyrics for the tune (from a music box!) serve as a paean to the late conductor,

including, as intro and outro, excerpts from a 2007 performance of nine poets 'chanting'. After the intensity of the recording, the performance was quiet but equally intense—harmony, love and creativity commingling.