

Jazz Inside Magazine

Nora McCarthy and The People of Peace Quintet

blesSINGS

By: Alex Henderson

Nora McCarthy's versatility has been one of her strong points. The New York City-based jazz vocalist, originally from Cleveland, took a very straight-ahead approach on her promising debut album of 1996, *red&blue*. But subsequently, McCarthy explored jazz' avant-garde because she was always a "free bird" at heart. In her collaborations with Jorge Sylvester that began in 2000, McCarthy has demonstrated that she is comfortable with both the inside and the outside. And whether she was getting into free-form outside improvisations or performing standards, McCarthy has been as expressive as she is unpredictable. McCarthy has a long history of giving 100%, which is what she continues to do on *blesSINGS*.

This self-produced CD is not an album of popular standards, although it doesn't delve deeply into the avant-garde either. One of the album's highlights is a memorable performance of Ornette Coleman's "The Blessing." But for the most part, *blesSINGS* is not an album of abstract avant-garde jazz, but rather, a highly melodic and accessible post-bop effort with a highly spiritual outlook. And McCarthy leads a cohesive unit called the People of Peace Quintet, which also includes Sylvester on alto saxophone, Pablo Vergara on acoustic piano, Donald Nicks on electric bass and Kenny Grohowski on drums.

Post-bop, of course, has a long history of spirituality. Heavily influenced by John Coltrane, great instrumentalists like Pharoah Sanders, McCoy Tyner, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Jackie McLean and Yusef Lateef thrived on spirituality during the 1960s and 1970s. So did singer Abbey Lincoln, one of the influences on *blesSINGS*. And with this album, McCarthy draws on both the spirituality of post-bop instrumentalists and the spirituality of post-bop vocal jazz.

That spirituality prevails on four songs by McCarthy ("Into the Middle of Something," "Restless Mind," "Listen Close to What the Trees Are Saying" and "Love Poem for the People") and two songs by Sylvester

(“Nimbus” and “Akara Moi Moi”) as well as Lucian Ban’s “Night on Earth,” Lawrence “Butch” Morris’ “Nowhere Everafter” and Tyner’s “Passion Dance.” The rapport that McCarthy enjoys with Sylvester, Vergara, Nicks and Grohowski on blesSINGS is consistently strong: instead of sounding like a mere backdrop for McCarthy’s vocals, they enjoy a genuine, honest-to-God dialogue with her. And thankfully, Sylvester and Vergara have plenty of solo space and room to stretch out. The spirit of improvisation prevails whether McCarthy is singing or other members of the People of Peace Quintet are taking a solo.

“Passion Dance” is a highly appropriate choice for blesSINGS given its rich history. Tyner (one of the greatest pianists of the last 55 years) unveiled that modal gem in 1967 on his classic album *The Real McCoy*, which was recorded for Blue Note Records and boasted Joe Henderson on tenor saxophone, Ron Carter on upright bass and Elvin Jones on drums. Tyner and Jones had played together in Coltrane’s quartet in the early to mid-1960s, and the deep spirituality that Coltrane was known for carried over after they left his employ and pursued their own projects. “Passion Dance” came to be recognized as a definitive example of spiritual post-bop, and it works undeniably well for McCarthy in a vocal context. Her lyrics fit Tyner’s melody perfectly, and as a lyricist, McCarthy fares equally well on Coleman’s “The Blessing” (which the trailblazing alto saxophonist recorded in 1958 on his Contemporary date *Something Else: The Music of Ornette Coleman*, an album that pre-dated his association with Atlantic Records and his work with bassist Charlie Haden).

McCarthy, in fact, wrote most of the lyrics on blesSINGS. The only lyrics she didn’t write on this album are the ones heard on the 11-minute opener “Love Poem for the People,” although she did write the composition for that selection (the poetic words are from James Akinwale Daniels). McCarthy also handles most of the arrangements on blesSINGS, although Sylvester is the arranger on McCarthy’s “Into the Middle of Something” and his own “Akara Moi Moi.”

The fact that McCarthy wrote so many lyrics for blesSINGS does not mean that she neglects scat-singing. McCarthy gets in plenty of memorable scatting on blesSINGS, and emotionally, she expresses herself in different ways on this album: as a performer and writer of lyrics, as a composer, as an arranger, and as a scat singer. McCarthy wears a variety of hats on blesSINGS and wears all of them well.

Some listeners might wonder what McCarthy's preference is: standards, avant-garde free jazz, bop, or post-bop and modal jazz? And the best answer to that question is, "All of the above." McCarthy is multi-faceted, and her ability to handle different styles of jazz equally well speaks highly of her. This time, spiritual post-bop is the main course, and blesSINGS is a fine addition to her catalogue.