

are minimal, giving the stage to Smith; his chords blend with White's lines to sound like one instrument. Lou returns for a cooing last chorus, and there's even a solo tag ending, a la Sonny Stitt. All that's missing is the hiss of a spinning LP; yesterday never sounded so good.

Don't view them as copycats: it is the style, more than the sound of any player, that this group emulates. The placid seashore feel of "La Costa" confronts a brusque baritone, hard-edged and firm. Piano and vibes follow its lead, adding bright flourishes to the dark road it takes. Stein's solo is a formal dance, with careful pace and tiny round chords – pretty but played a bit safe. Better is Warren, whose lines skitter wild and sink in a pool of vibrato.

Mingus' "Dry Cleaner from Des Moines" goes mostly to the bassist: White hums through the blues changes like nobody's business. Lou shouts the theme from his baritone as Stein hammers Monkish chords; one chorus and back to Chris, whose solo twangs and rings with overtones. Stein serves the good back-room blues; Lou's solo is good but oddly short. White's tune "Urban Flower" brings back the flute, an alto this time, and the faint patterings of distant percussion. With a throatier sound than before, Caputo spins slow circles, taking a brief soar but otherwise staying close to earth. This lead is followed by Smith, whose solo stays on the low notes and radiates energy. Stein's lush effort takes the prize here: Crossley's tom-toms push him on, then get a spotlight of their own.

A different flavor comes on "Interface":

Lou's breathy soprano sounds like Toots Thielemans' harmonica! He pushes upward against Stein's comp, as Smith chimes in for good measure. The lonely mood grows with Don's solo: jabbed notes and open spaces, enlivened at times by bluesy chords. Warren's solo dials back the vibrato, for a more brittle tone than usual. (Sounds like Johnny Lytle in places.) "If You Never Come" returns us to Brazil, and Caputo's flute; it reminds you of the 'Sixties, especially the records Pike did with Herbie Mann. When we reach the "Dreamer" half of the medley, Warren parallels Lou's lead, sounding like a second horn; his descending solo is a joy, splashing against the sparse background.

Things get fun on the homestretch. Stein delivers a strong theme on Dave Brubeck's "The Duke"; now on clarinet, Caputo ambles leisurely, not sounding like Desmond but still as dry. Smith's turn is playful, but it seems buried by the thick piano. And rounding things out is White's "Remembrance", its theme a cross of "Gloomy Sunday" and John Lewis' "Django". For the first minute it's just the leaders, White walking slowly and Lou weeping through his alto. A sad and stately parade: Stein enters with barely-heard chords, and then the whole gang. When Warren steps in all turns funky, and the cathedral becomes a jazz club. (Again, think "Django": the same thing happens on Milt Jackson's solo.) This is Warren's finest hour, helped by White's jaunty bassline; Stein's Evans-like solo takes us to a ballroom, and Lou's return is swinging but sad. This is a tune, and a group,

worth remembering; this is a timeless sound, which one hopes will be heard more often.



Rondi Charleston

SIGNS OF LIFE – Motema Music. www.motema.com; www.RondiCharleston.com. *DNA; Signs of Life; How the River Flows; The Wind Speaks; Footprints; Spirit Voices; In These Hours; Reflections; Babe's Blues; Chega de Saudade; The Cave Knows.*

PERSONNEL: Rondi Charleston, vocals; Dave Stryker, guitar; Brandon McCune, piano; Ed Howard, bass; Clarence Penn, drums; Mayra Casales, percussion; Gregoire Maret, harmonica on "Signs of Life" and "The Wind Speaks"; Ted Nash, tenor saxophone on "How the River Flows" on "Footprints".

By John R. Barrett, Jr.

To write your own songs, particularly in a genre where one expects standards, brings a raft of challenges. You want the lyric to be witty and

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Lou Caputo - soprano, alto, baritone saxophones, clarinet, flute

Chris White - bass

Warren Smith - vibraphone

Payton Crossley - drums

Don Stein - piano

Leopoldo Fleming - percussion

PREVIOUS CDs:

Urban Still Life

Not So Big Band



TRACKS: La Costa, I Love You, Lotus Blossom, The Duke, Azule Serape, Felicidade, The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines, Urban Flower, Interface, If You Never Come To Me/The Dreamer, Remembrance

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memorable, but can you sing it easily? Once that is accomplished, you worry about the tune, how the two fit together ... and whether your creation feels out of place on an album that also has standards. To even try such a task, you must dive in with both feet and give it everything; this is no problem for Rondi Charleston.

Given an emotive, enthusiastic voice, she instinctively reaches for reflective songs with unusual imagery – and when such songs are not there, supplies her own. The title track starts with a mystery (“I step down the wooden stairway through my cellar door/ And I breathe the musty air from 1844”) and ends with a reverie (“There’s a spoon that fed a baby/ I hear children’s voices laughing/ I smell supper in the kitchen up above.”) As her nostalgia grows warmer, so does the background: enveloping chords from Brandon McCune, tip-toeing bass, and the breezy wisp of harmonica.

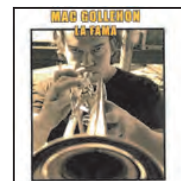
More than just accompaniment, the music comments on the lyric in a way you rarely hear. When she thinks about what people of the next century will think of her, the drum brushes hiss, as if laughing at the thought. The following line she does so herself, a stifled giggle following “a page of scribbled poetry”. Ideas like this run through “The Wind Speaks”, an environmental snap shot of the present and worry for the future. Under the breezy Bossa pulse, a voice calls out: “It dances over grapevines, kissing their leaves/ And whispers through the wheat fields and the wilderness/ Winding through the rivers, rustling their reeds.” Those reeds are joined by the harmonica’s, and the pattering cymbals conjure the

breeze as well as her words. There is passion, but no melodrama; concern without preaching – a love song to the earth told in its language.

Ted Nash adds a strong tenor to “How the River Flows”, in a turbulent 6/8 marked by tart bursts of piano. “We paddled deep to the heart of darkness/ Too late to realize/ The currents pulling beneath the surface/ Hoping to hypnotize.” When Rondi turns optimistic, urging to “push on through,” Nash does likewise, fluttering and surging over the cymbals’ crash. McCune does some rolling himself, indulging in ragtime before resuming the lush chords. On “Footprints” his harmonics are simpler, but the mood remains rich: Rondi becomes a overdubbed choir, Nash hints Wayne Shorter in his solo, and Dave Stryker’s guitar walking between them. There are places I think she over-emotes, but the good parts – where warm words are kissed by vibrato as Nash bids his farewell – are not easily forgotten. Not that you’d want to.

On some songs Charleston adopts a lighter touch, handling the tune simply as the musicians work their magic. The earthy charm of Paul Simon’s “Spirit Voices” fits her aesthetic well: this is a triumph of drums, of rippling tropic guitars, of a voice delighted by the life around her. The lyric and band are wonderfully vibrant, and there is no need to do more – her direct reading works well. For “Reflections”, McCune avoids the expected invocations of Monk, playing instead with ballroom elegance; fits well to one of Monk’s most romantic tunes. There’s a bit of wistfulness in “some living souls rearranged”, a little throatiness as she sings the sad

bridge; sometimes the best acting is barely noticed. Her jazziest reading comes on “Babe’s Blues”, a funky waltz by Randy Weston. McCune has fun with the chords, and so does Rondi: here she’s very hornlike, sliding the Jon Hendricks lyric and doing so with a big smile on her face. For dessert we get “The Cave Knows,” a tune she wrote with Fred Hersch for a documentary, and joined here by a small orchestra. An art song in all senses of the word, a sad topic (a network of tunnels in the Ukraine where Russian Jews sought refuge during World War II) is joined sad words and somber music ... to form something that transcends sadness. Rondi shouts and she sobs – but mostly she lets the words sink in. “The cave knows the fire in the night/ The evils of the world/ The cave knows the childhood lost forever/ Our whispered prayers of faith/ It gave us warmth and shelter/ It gave us the gift of time/ It gave us strength and freedom/ It gave us the gift of life.” Slow, dignified, unforgettable ; you cannot call it jazz, but I will call it beautiful. That word applies to the whole disc: a blending of word and sound you rarely get to hear.



Mac Gollehon

LA FAMA – www.mac-nyc.com. *La Fama; New Mac City; Introspection; Voices; Casino; Fried Neck Bones; Donde Lo Hace Duelen; Fotos De Los Ochentas; Conjunto Moods; Nite Trax; A Night in Tunisia.*

PERSONNEL: Mac Gollehon, trumpet and trombone; Charlie Palmieri, Larry Harlow, Hilton Ruiz, Gilberto Colon, Alon Nechushten, keyboards; Carlos Valdez, Frankie Malaby, S.A. Davis, Eddie Montalvo, congas; Francisco Bastar, Nicky Marrero, Poncho Roman, timbales; Jimmy Delgado, Ray Colon, percussion; Bernard Edwards, Ray Martinez, Victor Venegas, Alex Blake, bass; Ray Maldonado, Lester Bowie, Jose Febles, Doc Cheatham, Puchi Boulong, trumpet; Jose Rodriguez, Harry D’Aguiar, Barry Rogers, Michael Grey, trombone; Robert Arron, Maurice Smith, flute; Tony Thompson, drums; Pablo Rosario, bongo; Sammy Pagan, bata; Baron Raymonde, alto saxophone; A. J. Mantas, vibes.

By Mark Keresman

Mac Gollehon, trumpeter and trombonist, is one of those cats that you’ve heard whether or not you knew it. Aside from his credits in the jazz (a member of Lester Bowie’s Brass Fantasy) and NYC Latin spheres, Gollehon has performed on tons of rock, R&B, and pop sessions, including those helmed by Chic, David Bowie, Hall & Oates, Madonna, Rod Stewart, Mick Jagger, and more. *La Fama* is something of a “history of” collection, as it was recorded vari-

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