



Kurt Elling *Secrets Are The Best Stories*

EDITION 1151

★★★★

Secrets Are The Best Stories has a little secret of its own. Do Kurt Elling's opaquely metaphysical lyrics actually mean anything? Combined with the music of Jaco Pastorius, Wayne Shorter and collaborator/pianist Danilo Pérez, the result is one of his more challenging projects.

Audiences find Elling's dry, powdery baritone warm and welcoming at first. Then, just as they're getting comfortable, he'll bite them with a sharp twist of tartness; the seductive voice hides

elusive ambiguities. "The Fanfold Hawk (For Franz Wright)" is a Pastorius line for voice and bass whose vocalese combines a bird metaphor with self-help motivation. Even if it never comes to a point, the music is impressive, in part because it frames the virtuosity of Elling's sound so openly. But soon, listeners are pulled into philosophical questions without answers, made more puzzling by the knotty musical settings, which Elling and Pérez navigate with silky skill.

Elling's breathy interior monologue on "Stages II, III" floats on Pérez's pools of calm chords. On "Beloved," they move like shadows of each other, roaming the scales with an elusive logic that seems theirs alone. But voice and music converge on pitches and phrases that remind listeners how exactly the musical specifications are laid out. Elling sings lines that seem impossible. Dystopian dissonance and nightmarish musical images feed dense metaphors wrapped in poetic camouflage. The passion is earnest and pitch perfect. Now, if only I understood exactly what he was singing about.

—John McDonough

Secrets Are The Best Stories: The Fanfold Hawk (For Franz Wright); A Certain Continuum; Stays; Gratitude (For Robert Bly); Stage I; Beloved (For Toni Morrison); Stages II, III; Song Of The Rio Grande (For Oscar And Valeria Martinez-Ramirez); Rabo De Nube; Esperanto; Epilogo. (46:53)

Personnel: Kurt Elling, vocals; Danilo Pérez, piano; Miguel Zenón (6), alto saxophone; Chico Pinheiro (10), guitar; Clark Sommers, bass; Jonathan Blake (2, 6), drums; Rogerio Boccato (3, 4, 6, 10), Román Diaz (2), percussion.

Ordering info: editionrecords.com

Amina Figarova Edition 113 *Persistence*

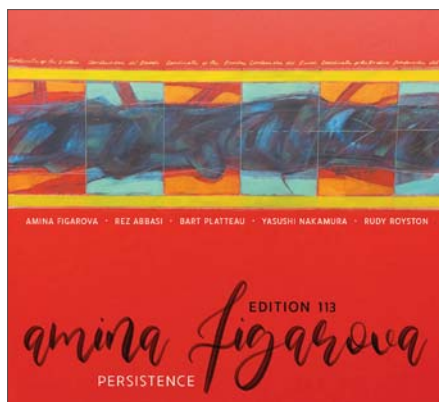
AMFI 015

★★★★★

Genre-splicing fusion is a tricky thing to get right. Strike the wrong balance between structure and sound, and you can end up with a pastiche that does a disservice to each component part. For pianist Amina Figarova, it's a risky move to produce an electronic-inflected, part hip-hop and funk-jazz fusion album after 20 years leading an acoustic ensemble.

Aptly titled, *Persistence* is a surprising delight and one that seemingly avoids many of the pitfalls of fusion. The opening title track launches into enthralling rhythmic interplay between drummer Rudy Royston and bassist Yasushi Nakamura, while flutist Bart Platteau channels the spirit of the *Headhunters* in his soaring melodies. Figarova, meanwhile, artfully comps, switching between piano and synthesizer. The record continues in this breathless vein, riffing off of Robert Glasper's hip-hop mentality for "I've Got No Time," while "R Song" highlights Platteau and Figarova's almost telepathic interweaving with guitarist Rez Abbasi.

Even on slower numbers—"Morning Blue" and "Horizons"—Figarova and her band man-



age to create a convincing sonic collage of acoustic and electric sounds: jazz swing and hip-hop swag, and a rollicking funk bottom end. Figarova does trip up on the somewhat gratuitous inclusion of rapper JSWISS for "I've Got No Time." But Paul Jost's open vocalizations, mirroring Platteau's melody on "Horizons," are genius.

Ultimately, *Persistence* stands as a worthy template for a wholly open approach to jazz that's generous enough for the inclusion of myriad influences.

—Ammar Kalia

Persistence: Persistence; I've Got No Time; Lil' Poem; Morning Blue; R Song; Horizons; Bliss. (43:07)

Personnel: Amina Figarova, keyboard; Rez Abbasi, guitar; Bart Platteau, B-flat flute d'amore, EWI; Yasushi Nakamura, bass; Rudy Royston, drums; JSWISS (2), Paul Jost (6), Skye's World (7), vocals.

Ordering info: amfi-records.com



Luciana Souza *Storytellers*

SUNNYSIDE 1575

★★★★★

Big band singers were such a ubiquitous fixture in jazz at one time that the model seemed set in stone. Arrangers like Gil Evans, Bob Brookmeyer and Maria Schneider brought new shadings and textures to the instrumentation, but the perky or heartbroken role vocalists played stayed locked in the past.

Vince Mendoza is one of those arrangers who has introduced new, subtle voicings, and Luciana Souza is one of the few singers who has ably moved between singing with both symphonies and contemporary jazz orchestras. Given those credentials, it should be no surprise that combining them with the WDR Big Band Cologne—a frequent vehicle for Mendoza's arranging—and a broad selection of Brazilian compositions would yield impressive results.

Souza's vocals—sung either in Portuguese or wordlessly—are exceptionally well integrated with the band, to the extent that she sounds like a 22nd instrument on "Varanda." Highly cinematic, the piece serves as the perfect introduction to a carefully crafted version of "Matita Perê," Antônio Carlos Jobim's sweeping tribute to his country's ecology and the common man. Mendoza's arrangement is multilayered, with a flawless tempo shift at its midpoint and an effective soprano solo by Johan Hörlen. But the primary strength of WDR is that it can execute both the buttery blends Mendoza wrote for a version of "Beatriz" and clear the decks for expressive solos. In addition, veteran drummer Hans Dekker has the lithe touch and supple feel to provide the ideal accompaniment for *Storytellers*.

—James Hale

Storytellers: Varanda; Matita Perê; Se Acontecer; Beatriz; Choro #3; Meu Pai; Baião A Tempo; Chora Coração; Mar De Copacabana; Sim Ou Não. (59:34)

Personnel: Luciana Souza, vocals; Wim Both, Rob Bruyten, Andy Haderer, Ruud Breuls, John Marshall, Bastian Stein, trumpet; Ludwig Nuss, Shannon Barnett, Andy Hunter, trombone; Mattis Cederberg, trombone, tuba; Johan Hörlen, Karolina Strassmayer, Olivier Peters, Paul Heller, Jens Neufang, Stefan Karl Schmid, saxophones; Paul Shighihara, guitar; Rainer Böhm, piano; John Goldsby, bass; Hans Dekker, drums; Marcio Doctor, percussion.

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