

## Roberta Flack - First Take (1969)

Written by bluelover

Saturday, 09 March 2019 13:22 -

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*A1 Compared To What 5:15 A2 Angelitos Negros 6:55 A3 Our Ages Or Our Hearts 6:09  
A4 I Told Jesus 6:08 B1 Hey, That's No Way To Say Goodbye 4:07 B2 The First Time Ever I  
Saw Your Face 5:21 B3 Tryin' Times 5:07 B4 Ballad Of The Sad Young Men 7:03*

Arranged By [Horns, Strings] – William Fischer Baritone Saxophone – Seldon Powell (tracks: A1, A4) Bass – Ron Carter Cello – Charles McCracken (tracks: A2 to B2, B4), George Ricci (tracks: A2 to B2, B4) Conductor [Strings] – William Fischer (tracks: A2 to B2, B4) Drums – Ray Lucas Guitar – John Pizzarelli Piano, Vocals – Roberta Flack Tenor Saxophone – Frank Wess (tracks: A1, A4) Trombone – Bennie Powell (tracks: A1, A4) Trumpet – Jimmy Nottingham (tracks: A1, A4), Joe Newman (tracks: A1, A4) Viola – Alfred Brown (tracks: A2 to B2, B4), Selwart Clarke (tracks: A2 to B2, B4), Theodore Israel (tracks: A2 to B2, B4) Violin – Emanuel Green (tracks: A2 to B2, B4), Gene Orloff (tracks: A2 to B2, B4)

Roberta Flack's debut album, titled *First Take* in true underachiever fashion, introduced a singer who'd assimilated the powerful interpretive talents of Nina Simone and Sarah Vaughan, the earthy power of Aretha Franklin, and the crystal purity and emotional resonance of folksingers like Judy Collins. Indeed, the album often sounded more like vocal jazz or folk than soul, beginning with the credits: a core quartet of Flack on piano, John Pizzarelli on guitar, Ron Carter on bass, and Ray Lucas on drums, as fine a lineup as any pop singer could hope to recruit. With only one exception -- the bluesy, grooving opener "Compared to What," during which Flack proves her chops as a soul belter -- she concentrates on readings of soft, meditative material. A pair of folk covers, "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" and "Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye," are heart-wrenching standouts; the first even became a surprise hit two years later, when its appearance in the Clint Eastwood film *Play Misty for Me* pushed it to the top of the pop charts and earned Flack her first Grammy award for Record of the Year. Her arrangement of the traditional "I Told Jesus" has a simmering power, while "Ballad of the Sad Young Men" summons a stately sense of melancholy. Flack also included two songs from her college friend and future duet partner, Donny Hathaway, including a tender examination of the classic May-December romance titled "Our Ages or Our Hearts." The string arrangements of William Fischer wisely keep to the background, lending an added emotional weight to all of Flack's pronouncements. No soul artist had ever recorded an album like this,

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making First Take one of the most fascinating soul debuts of the era. ---John Bush, AllMusic Review

Eight superbly interrupted tracks but often when playing this record I start with the flip or side two and not because of the single although that is one added bonus but the album commences with one of my favourite songwriters, Leonard Cohen with a beautiful rendition from Roberta of "Hey, That's No Way To Say Goodbye" with that stunning accapella intro with some great brush work from Ray Lucas on drums with just the right touch between the strings which are added to the number but it is the Quartet sound that is still prevalent throughout with Roberta Flack adding a nice little piano solo but that voice when she sings just sweeps all away with the enchantment. The second track on the album is the hit "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" written by Ewan MacColl and it is a folk song from the man who also penned "Dirty Old Town" and to think that he wrote this tune in one hurry and taught it to his wife Peggy Seeger over the phone. Roberta Flack has taken the song and made it hers bringing an ethereal feel to the composition which today is up there in those top 100 songs polls now and again but listen to Ron Carter on bass with his slow throb that he keeps constant throughout with his immaculate timing. This album owes so much to his input and yes I am a fan but it is not often on an artists debut you get one of the best bass players on earth to assist. Righteousness comes to the fore here with "Tryin' Times" and this is just the Quartet with no strings giving the album a constant variety of songs and Roberta Flack plays a great solo on piano but her voice being so good just keeps detracting from this talent of hers as she hits those vocal heights superbly throughout the composition. The actual album closer is "Ballad of The Sad Young Men" which is a standard and taken to new heights with a very slow spaced approach and the strings are used here but as I mentioned above they are mixed so beautifully throughout the production by always keeping Roberta Flack's voice and the Quartet at the front and at times the strings are unnoticable and you really have to listen for them as they are just blended in superbly throughout.

Side one of the record starts with "Compared to What" which is one of the two tunes where we get horns added on the album with a bit more righteousness and a bit of a Blues feel but it is Jazz that is the end product with this combination of influence. "Angelito Negros" the tune made famous by Pedro Infante with the great Antonio Machin and Eartha Kitt also having versions but like that hit single from this album this is the one for me being simply stunning. "Our Ages of Our Hearts" which is the second Donny Hathaway song used on the album by Roberta brings only more quality listening for you to enjoy. The Gospel gets a go with "I Told Jesus" with Ron just putting those great bass strums over this slow ethereal composition where like all the other songs on the album the intensity of Roberta Flack's vocals just slowly builds throughout.

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What a debut and one that is Jazz in its purest and you may ask why I take this perspective but the fact is what happened here was we have what basically is a Jazz Vocal Quartet which has a slight from the time contemporary influence added being R&B with Gospel and a pinch of Blues spice thrown in, getting away from the more standard Jazz vocal group sound. Original most definitely and one can see what Les McCann was excited about when he raced off to Atlantic to get Roberta Flack signed. One other note I should mention is, ten hours is all it took to get this beautifull record cut. ---Matt, jazzmusicarchives.com

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