Nnenna Freelon - Blueprint Of A Lady - Sketches Of Billie Holiday (2005)



1. I Didnt Know What Time It Was 2. What A Little Moonlight Can Do 3. Dont Explain play
4. God Bless The Child 5. Strange Fruit
play
6. Willow Weep For Me 7. Balm In Gilead 8. Them There Eyes 9. Only You Will Know 10. Youve Changed 11. Now Or Never 12. Lover Man 13. Left Alone 14. Interlude - Little Brown Bird 15. All Of Me
Personnel: Nnenna Freelon: vocals; Brandon McCune: piano: Fender Rhodes: Hammond B-3: trumpet; Wayne Batchelor: acoustic bass; Kinah Boto: drums; Beverly Botsford: percussion; Christian Scott: trumpet (1,2,8); Mary Fettig: alto and baritone saxes: alto flute (1,2); Dave Ellis (1,2,12) and Doug Lawrence (10,11): tenor sax; Julian Lage (3,8,11,15) and Andre Bush (9, duet with Nnenna): guitar; Jessica Ivry: cello (3,8).

Nnenna Freelon's latest project pays tribute to singer Billie Holiday in the best possible way—without imitation and putting her own interpretations on material written by or associated with Lady Day. Her band, adjusted to fit the mood of each song, skillfully complements her at every turn. Freelon's phrasing and vocal clarity contribute to an overall feeling that is more positive than Holiday's often dark and plaintive renditions of the same material.

Interspersed within this tribute are three natural fits that don't come directly from the Holiday Songbook. "Only You Will Know and "Interlude-Little Brown Bird are original collaborations by Freelon and Brandon McCune that pay homage to Lady Day. The former, an intimate vocal-guitar duet with Andre Bush, enables Freelon to question aloud whether she should imitate Holiday's style or approach the project's material in a different manner. Holiday's answer in this imagined vocal dialogue was: "Sing until you know who you are and why you came... You may sing a Lady song, sweet drawl soft and low/but only if the song is you and only you will know.

The third is "Balm in Gilead —a traditional African-American affirmation of faith, hope and optimism that enriches all of the other material. This duo version on which Freelon is accompanied by pianist McCune, leads into an uplifting and vibrant version of "Them There Eyes.

Doug Lawrence's tenor sax offers a sublime conversational response to Freelon's vocals on "You've Changed and takes a different role on "Now Or Never by reinforcing and at times echoing her voice. Dave Ellis takes a more out-in-front complementary tenor role on the bluesy and soulful version of "Lover Man that follows. Julian Lage's guitar artistry sparkles throughout "Don't Explain and on several other tracks.

"Left Alone presents a Holiday work she never recorded. Lady Day wrote it with the late Mal Waldron. Abbey Lincoln was the first vocalist to record the tune—in 1961. Freelon's vocals plus quartet version unearths the positives buried beneath Holiday's words about loneliness. "All of Me concludes this fine session with another twist—a sultry reggae arrangement of the classic ballad. --- Ken Franckling

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