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Album review: Esperanza Spalding, 'Chamber Music Society'

Tuesday, August 17, 2010

Esperanza Spalding

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

A classically trained bassist, Esperanza Spalding made her jazz debut in 2008 and became something of an overnight sensation, with bookings on Letterman and Jimmy Kimmel and an invitation from President Obama to perform at the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony and concert. As its title suggests, her new album draws on both her jazz and conservatory impulses. The result is an intimate, heady mix.

In "Little Fly," Spalding sets William Blake's poem of the same name to a ruminative melody that shows off the supple range of her gossamer soprano. "Knowledge of Good and Evil," a dissonant meditation on the biblical account of the fall, features evocative scat singing. The capering "Chacarera" employs dynamic contrasts to vivid dramatic effect.

Latin inflections color several tracks. "In?til Paisagem," a deft reworking of a bossa nova by Ant?nio Carlos Jobim, has Spalding and guest vocalist Gretchen Parlato trading syncopated whispers. "Apple Blossom" pairs Spalding with Brazilian pop star Milton Nascimento, while "Wild Is the Wind" re-imagines the Dimitri Tiomkin classic for melodica. (The song has been recorded by everyone from Nina Simone to Cat Power.)

The mood throughout the album's 11 tracks is languid and improvisatory, with Spalding and members of her chamber ensemble weaving in and out of roomy arrangements that afford them as much chance to linger on a note as to take off on flights of melodic or rhythmic fancy. Their fusion of jazz, contemporary classical and other sources, including some understated funk, is as lively as it is original.

-- Bill Friskics-Warren

Recommended tracks:

"Little Fly," "Knowledge of Good and Evil," "In?til Paisagem"



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