

JazzTimes

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Deanna Witkowski
From This Place (Tilapia)

By Christopher Loudon

Following the hallowed path of Mary Lou Williams, pianist and vocalist Deanna Witkowski devotes her fourth album exclusively to the blending of jazz and liturgy, drawing on scripture, the Mass, 19th-century poetry and original verses to build this expansive house of musical worship. Four notes into saxophonist Donny McCaslin's bluesy intro to "Let My Prayer Rise" it becomes evident how invigorating this marriage of secular and spiritual will be. With the slightly scorched purity of Witkowski's vocals (and the angelic virtuosity of her playing) as the central pillar, McCaslin, bassist John Patitucci and drummer Scott Latzky circle like impish altar boys, never irreverent yet eager to splash her white lace with vibrant daubs.

The cornerstone of *From This Place* is a four-part extraction from the evening jazz mass Witkowski wrote a decade ago for Manhattan's All Angels' Church (where she served as music director). For two segments, she forms a glorious union with vocalists Peter Eldridge, Kate McGarry and Laila Biali to create what might fairly be called the Holy New York Voices. McGarry and Biali later return for the soaring a cappella "Never Before," which tells of the revelation to Mary that she will bear the Christ child. But perhaps most praiseworthy is the tracing of Mary Magdalene's Easter morning epiphany on the title track, begun in cold shadows then opening up like a glorious sunrise.



Deanna Witkowski: Liturgical Jazz

Interview with Liane Hansen on NPR's *Weekend Edition Sunday*

April 12, 2009 - Deanna Witkowski is a pianist and vocalist whose latest project embraces the sacred.

Like Mary Lou Williams before her, she's taken her jazz talents and merged them with liturgical music. Witkowski's new album *From This Place* sets hymns, psalms and even part of a Mass service for jazz quartet and multiple vocalists.

Witkowski has plenty of jazz chops – this is her fourth recording, and for the past three years, she has been the pianist for the BMI/New York Jazz Composers Orchestra led by Jim McNeely. But for several years, she was also the musical director for All Angels' Church in New York City.

"I found out that there was a tradition in the church that music directors there would write a Mass setting specifically for that congregation," Witkowski says. "So this particular service at All Angels' was primarily gospel music. So I wanted to write something that kind of fit in with the music that always was present there."

In an interview with Liane Hansen, Witkowski talks about how she approaches writing sacred jazz. She says she grew up in Protestant traditions without Mass liturgies – not that there was no music in her churches.

"I did grow up listening to hymns, though – or at least singing them in church," she says. "So some of the record that takes old hymn texts and resets them – those are hymns that I've sung for years."

Full audio interview is available at nprmusic.org.



Review Courtesy AllAboutJazz.com

From This Place
Deanna Witkowski | Tilapia Records
By Jerry D'Souza

Deanna Witkowski takes the spiritual road on *From This Place* through gospel, Catholic liturgy, blues and jazz, and 19th century text to which she has written music.

Sacred music and jazz have come together through Mary Lou Williams and Duke Ellington, to name two, while John Coltrane brought in his own ardent beliefs to several of his compositions. Witkowski's sacerdotal calling is strongly manifested, particularly in the sincerity of her singing.

“Let My Prayer Rise (Psalm 141)” is a gospel tune with Donny McCaslin laying the groove on the tenor saxophone. His warmth embraces the innate fervor with Witkowski adding to the impact with her pure, soaring voice. McCaslin is comfortable in several situations and this is one more for him; he makes it a memorable experience.

Laila Biali and Kate McGarry join Witkowski on the *a cappella* “Never Before,” the purity of their harmonies circling and descending in a cloak of velvet. The words, written by Witkowski, are a testament to her faith and sound unabashedly naked in their sensibility; they harken back to the time when the human soul sought the spirit of the Lord and found communion with it. The mood is relaxed when Peter Eldridge turns up for a quartet to take on the joyous “Keep in Mind” accompanied by the piano and a melodic turn of phrase on the electric bass by John Patitucci. The juxtaposition of the two works well with the intensity of the first being calmed by the relaxing timbre of the second.

The modern does not escape her and Witkowski gives “Take My Life and Let it Be” and “Song of Simeon” straightforward contemporary turns. They are intensely personal evocations, but “Take My Life and Let It Be” may be in better form because of the harmonies.

Witkowski comes up solidly on the side of faith and those who lean towards religious music will be rewarded.



Deanna Witkowski, *From This Place* (2009, Tilapia)

By Andrea Canter, Contributing Editor

An accomplished bandleader, composer and liturgist, pianist Deanna Witkowski has spent the past decade in diverse pursuits. Winner of the 2002 Great American Jazz Piano Competition, she has explored Brazilian rhythms, released three acclaimed jazz recordings, and composed for church liturgy in Chicago and New York. Now, following in the giant footsteps of Duke Ellington and Mary Lou Williams, Witkowski releases her first set of sacred music, setting traditional hymns to original music and taking on the task of writing liturgical text for several compositions. *From This Place* features Witkowski the vocalist as much as Witkowski the pianist, and brings along a trio of stellar singers (Laila Biali, Peter Eldridge and Kate McGarry) as guests on four tracks. Her quartet has chops to match—saxophonist Donny McCaslin, bassist John Patitucci and drummer Scott Latzky. While there is no doubt as to the foundations of text in Christian traditions, Witkowski views “all music as sacred, if it is made with the intent to heal, uplift and rejuvenate spirits” and further suggests that much of this music can be presented in the jazz club context: “People, whether or not from a Christian tradition or faith background can at least feel the story, experience the story or just experience the music.” That said, the text is impossible to ignore; yet listeners outside a strong Christian tradition should feel that the musical experience itself is indeed uplifting. As a pianist and composer, Witkowski recalls Fred Hersch and the softer side of Marilyn Crispell. In particular the recording starts with a strong nod to blues and gospel with “Let My Prayer Rise” (Psalm 141), glorified by McCaslin’s high-spirited tenor. Witkowski’s title track swirls with a symphonic urgency, and the *a cappella* trio of Witkowski, Biali and McGarry on “Never Before” is a triumph of vocal harmony. Patitucci is elegant throughout and particularly on his solo on “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say.” Witkowski is solid as a modern vocalist but exquisite as pianist and composer, in any context.

Deanna Witkowski: From This Place
Tilapia 0002

June 15, 2009

By Joseph Taylor

I missed Deanna Witkowski's previous disc, *Length of Days* (2006), but I reviewed and thoroughly enjoyed her first two, *Having to Ask* (2001) and *Wide Open Window* (2003). On her newest album, *From This Place*, the pianist has focused, as she writes in her liner notes, "specifically on sacred music." Witkowski follows in the footsteps of Duke Ellington, Dave Brubeck, and Mary Lou Williams, all of whom wrote religious works in the jazz idiom. She has taken texts from "nineteenth century poets, scripture, the Mass, and occasionally, my original verses" and set them to imaginative and stirring melodies. Her music is respectful and worshipful, but never solemn. Witkowski is a wonderfully gifted pianist with a strong sense of beauty and harmony, but I was unprepared for how natural and affecting her voice is. Her technical skills as a singer nearly match her keyboard prowess, but in both cases, what she most powerfully conveys is emotional truth. The words of the four sections of Evening Mass -- Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei -- will be familiar to anyone who has heard or attended a mass, but Witkowski musically recharges them. Donny McCaslin, on reeds, has accompanied her before, and the two have a wonderful symbiosis. Bassist John Patitucci and drummer Scott Latzky show a deep understanding for the pianist's musical and spiritual goals, and offer understated assistance that, on repeated hearings, reveals their consummate skills. A warm analog recording, and an inspiring and moving disc.

ChicagoJazz.com

By Paul Abella

Pianist Deanna Witkowski has made her home in New York for the past 11 years after studying in the Chicago suburbs at Wheaton College's conservatory. In her time there, she's worked as the musical director at All Angels' Church, and in other religious settings as well. The fruits of that labor are here for all to see on Witkowski's latest album, *From This Place*.

I'll be honest here and say that this is great music, but hard music to describe from a jazz standpoint. Certainly, there is plenty of improvisation to go around, and no one with even half of a brain would dare question the jazz credentials of anyone involved with this disc. But this isn't the spirituals of Grant Green's *Feelin' The Spirit*, nor does it have that "gone to church" feeling that runs through the music of Ramsey Lewis or Gene Harris. This is liturgical music first, and Jazz second. That realignment of priorities pushes the music here in some beautiful directions, but that also means that this becomes a disc whose value is completely dependant on intent. If you're looking for some of the most grooving music to have ever been played at a mass, then you, my friend, are in for a treat.

This is also a disc that rewards multiple and intensive listenings. Once I started to realize that this disc is more about affirming one's faith than blowing one's mind, it started to reveal its charms. This disc has some beautiful moments that aren't at all jazz, and it has some gorgeous moments that couldn't be mistaken for anything else. Because this is music meant first and foremost for church services, the rhythms are simple, and the improvisations are short (I'd love to hear a few of these songs in more performance oriented situations), but, considering their purpose, they are effective.

One of the interesting things about *From This Place* is the useage of old hymn text and psalms. Excepting the lyrics written by Witkowski and the song *Keep In Mind*, which features a 20th century paraphrase of one of Paul's epistles, all of the lyrics here come from poets or hymn writers of the 1800's. On a few of the slower songs here, Witkowski uses the meandering meter of the poems she's dealing with in fascinating ways. *I Heard The Voice of Jesus Say* is a glowing example of this. Witkowski's piano and Patitucci's bass weave around the lyrics, and McCaslin's soprano is used to great effect. Witkowski's solo unfolds beautifully, arcing with Latzky's loose drumming, and finally coming back down to earth with a gorgeous, albeit short, solo from Pattitucci.

The midtempo selections seem to be aimed towards congregational singing, and while it doesn't make for fascinating listening from a Jazz standpoint, as I stated before, this is certainly the most grooving music that I've ever heard come out of a Catholic church.

Let My Prayer Rise, a musical adaptation of Psalm 141 is an exception. It swings lightly, but effectively. And, at least to these ears, it's reminiscent of Blueberry Hill. Christ the Light turns up the heat a bit, and I wish that McCaslin's solo on this one had been a bit longer.

Witkowski's originals on From This Place are some of the most interesting selections here. The song From This Place builds beautifully and is a definite high point on the disc. Never Before is Witkowski's recounting of the angels telling St. Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus. While not at all jazz, it is the most striking moment on the CD. An a cappella piece in 3 part harmony, it's stop what you're doing gorgeous. The four-part Evening Mass bounces between delicate funk (there's really no other way to describe it) and contemplative balladry.

As a jazz musician writing for the church and church folk, she's in some pretty great company: Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, Dave Brubeck, and more recently, Gregory Tardy have all written sacred works of varying size and scope. While I might hope that someday Witkowski would write for GOD, as opposed to "THE CHURCH" (in the way that Ellington and Tardy have done), in the meantime, From This Place will do, and will do quite well. If you're looking for Jazz that can double as "inspirational" music, I'd highly recommend it.

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Beyond Race Magazine **BeyondRace.com**

Deanna Witkowski- From This Place (Tilapia)

By Ernest Barteldes

After years of playing and performing straight-ahead jazz and Brazilian jazz, this native Chicagoan (she currently resides in New York) has emerged with an inspirational disc based on the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

Backed by a group that includes musicians from her working quartet (Donny McCastlin, saxophones; John Patitucci, bass; Scott Latzky, drums), Witkowski sings and plays music that could easily fit within the format of a mass - including "Kyrie," "Gloria" and "Sanctus" set to original music.

Going in a more sacred direction, however, has not changed her jazz tendencies - tunes like the bluesy "Let My Prayer Rise (Psalm 141)" and "Song of Simeon" would not at all be out of place in a club - all the improvisation characteristic of the genre are present there, and can be fully appreciated by those who don't plan to set foot in a house of worship anytime soon. The music is rich and enjoyable regardless of one's religious leanings.