

JazzTimes

JazzTimes- February 2006 issue
Deanna Witkowski
Length of Days (ArtistShare)

If, among contemporary pianists, Brad Mehldau and Bill Charlap represent the gold standard, then Deanna Witkowski deservedly ranks as their sterling sister. Echoing Mehldau's genre-blurring vivacity and Charlap's harmonic sophistication, the classically trained Witkowski textures her increasingly assured playing with the Latin and African influences she adores and the sacred themes she lives by. That she sings, too, in a reedy voice that's no match for her keyboard authoritativeness but is intriguingly arresting nonetheless, is simply enrichment to her hearty musical stew.

On this, her third album as leader (available only at deannajazz.com), she teams with saxophonist Donny McCaslin, bassist Dave Ambrosio and drummer Vince Cherico on an intoxicatingly bubbly "Straight, No Chaser," infuses "In the Still of the Night" with starlight twinkle and filters "I'm Beginning to See the Light" through a multihued prism. It is, though, two less obvious choices- the jaunty "Hi-Lili, Hi-Lo," lifted from a 1953 Leslie Caron musical and slowed to a snail's pace, and the Sherman brothers' winsome "Feed the Birds" (from *Mary Poppins*)- coupled with the self-penned title track (based on the biblical account of St. Paul's conversion) that best reflect the gentle humanity of Witkowski's jazz soul.

-Christopher Loudon



Review Courtesy AllAboutJazz.com

Length of Days

Deanna Witkowski | ArtistShare

By John Kelman

Brian Camelio's ArtistShare model, allowing music to be distributed without the inherent loss of profitability that comes from dealing with all manner of middle men, has taken off in the past two years, with releases by artists like Maria Schneider, Jim Hall, and Cuong Vu. By placing more control in the artist's hands, he's made it possible for the kinds of sales numbers associated with jazz's more marginalized position to not inherently result in financial loss. And while the idea of internet-only sales is relatively new, the success of many of ArtistShare's releases proves that people are willing to accept innovative ways to get their music.

It's an especially important concept for less-known artists like pianist/vocalist Deanna Witkowski. While her first two albums--*Having to Ask* (Orchard, 2000) and *Wide Open Window* (Khaeon, 2003)--demonstrated an emerging talent, *Length of Days* is her most fully-realized to date, and consequently a perfect fit for the growing reputation and influence of ArtistShare.

It's no surprise that Witkowski studied with Chucho Valdés and Hilario Durán, as her own writing clearly reflects an interest in Afro-Cuban and Brazilian music. But she's equally informed by the more detailed compositional approach of Pat Metheny and Lyle Mays. The airy two-chord vamp that provides the foundation for her solo on "Beautiful Hands" sounds, in fact, like an outtake from *Pat Metheny Group* (ECM, 1978), specifically the popular "Phase Dance." But her conception is all-acoustic, incorporating her wordless vocals in the same way that Metheny would on later albums like *Still Life (Talking)* (Geffen, 1987).

Still, while Witkowski retains strong ties to the music of Brazil, her references are subsumed in a distinctively soft veneer that isn't afraid to apply bolder contemporary harmony. When she sings lyrics, as she does on the little-known MGM tune "Hi-Lili, Hi-Lo" and her own title track--a melancholy ballad which still possesses a clear optimism--she remains whisper-like and understated.

-page 2- John Kelman review on *Length of Days*

The overall ambience of *Length of Days* is relaxed and gentle--introspective, even--although the quartet's look at Cole Porter's "In the Still of the Night" has a slow burn to it, as does the aforementioned "Beautiful Hands." And while Witkowski's piano style bears little of Monk's quirkiness on the classic "Straight, No Chaser," her ending--where she and saxophonist Donny McCaslin take the final phrase and reiterate it on a continual ascension into the stratosphere--shows that she's not without a sense of humour.

Witkowski's playing is considered but never contrived. Though she reflects some of Lyle Mays' romantic impressionism, she's a more steadfastly economical player. McCaslin, on the other hand, generates real heat on "Beautiful Hands" and meshes beautifully with Witkowski's voice on "Song for Sarah" and in playful call-and-response fashion on "Prayer for Linda."

The depth of Witkowski's approach is almost concealed by her elegant delivery, but she's another contemporary jazz artist who successfully masks complexity in an undeniably accessible sound. *Length of Days* is a high water mark in Witkowski's career to date, and one well worth checking out.



DEANNA WITKOWSKI Length of Days (ArtistShare) ****

Witkowski is an emerging and impressive pianist, singer and composer on the New York scene, whose influences probably include Chucho Valdés and Lyle Mays. Her sheer musicality is abundantly evident, from a well-developed sense of line and harmony in composition, to the airily individual takes on standards like Hi-Lili, Hi-Lo, In the Still of the Night and I'm Beginning to See the Light. Although she's a good singer with a light, almost artless delivery that is, in fact, highly artful, it's her piano and composing that register most strongly. The four Witkowski originals are full of character, and the album benefits enormously from the presence of the marvellous Donny McCaslin on tenor and soprano, with Dave Ambrosio (bass) and Vince Chericco (drums) making up a formidable quartet playing music that manages to combine complexity with accessibility.

Ray Comiskey



Review Courtesy AllAboutJazz.com

Length of Days

Deanna Witkowski | ArtistShare

By Dan McClenaghan

Pianist Deanna Witkowski began her musical journey on the classical side, studying piano and flute. In college jazz called, first on the saxophone, then through piano lessons from Chucho Valdes and Hilario Duran. *Length of Days*, Witkowski's third release as a leader, opens with "Beautiful Hands," inspired by a compliment given to her by Billy Childs. High praise from such an accomplished fellow pianist/composer, but he could just as well have remarked on a beautiful throat to compliment Witkowski's vocal prowess. She uses her voice to color her arrangements with vibrant hues, whether on her wordless, melifluous chant on the opener, or lyrically on the title tune that bemoans spiritual empiness--inspired, reportedly, on the pianist's meditations on the New Testament image of St. Peter's [sic: St. Paul's] blinding conversion.

Witkowski's teaming with saxophonist Donny McCaslin (who was nominated for a Grammy for his work on Maria Schneider's *Concert in the Garden*) is a key to this disc's success. Witkowski the arranger crafts complex harmonies, and her voice and McCaslin's soprano saxophone sound as if they were created to play together, a magical blend in harmony, with McCaslin extending the vocalist's phrases with an inspired improvisational logic.

Cole Porter's "In the Still of the Night" gets a piano trio treatment, with Witkowski taking the melody up and twisting it around a bit, an uplifting stretch. Much of Witkowski's sound is shaded by her spirituality, but she gets deep into the jazz religion with Thelonious Monk's "Straight, No Chaser," with McCaslin trading in the smooth-flowing soprano for a beefy tenor sax, blowing down and dirty while Witkowski plays light and clean behind him.

The disc closes with Ellington's "I'm Beginning to See the Light," with McCaslin again on tenor, giving way to an uplifting, Chucho-esque arrangement, the rhythm bubbling, Witkowski stepping light and pretty."

Good Times Magazine

Maine's Music and Entertainment Paper

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Length of Days

Review by Steve Feeney

Pianist/composer/vocalist Deanna Witkowski has been making a name for herself- slowly but steadily- on the national level over the past decade. Some may even remember the New Hampshire native backing Lizz Wright at a Freeport concert a couple of summers ago. But she has also been busy releasing her own highly praised discs that have shown her to be a maturing artist on the rise.

Length of Days is her third disc as a leader, and there is a lot to recommend. Witkowski primarily writes and plays a flowing post-bop style that- though there are some gentle touches of melancholy- is basically of an uplifting nature. This fits with her open spirituality (the title cut was inspired by New Testament images), but nonetheless, has real musical depth rooted in the jazz tradition.

The disc begins with the original "Beautiful Hands." This (and a couple of other cuts) may make some listeners recall the work of Luciana Souza, as Witkowski extends throaty vocals over Latin rhythms advanced by drummer Vince Cherico. Her piano solo on this piece develops a surprisingly edgy momentum before giving way to a very strong and expressive solo from Donny McCaslin on soprano sax.

The twining of Witkowski's wordless vocal with McCaslin's soprano is a highlight of "Prayer for Linda," a tune that gently evolves through a rich bass solo by Dave Ambrosio into a pensive piano solo from the leader. Witkowski proves again how something as simple as an ascending series of chords, in the right hands, can take a well-constructed performance to a higher level.

The band works out on Thelonious Monk's "Straight, No Chaser" with the leader playing a surprisingly tough solo after McCaslin's honking attack on tenor. Fans who caught the saxophonist's appearance in Portland last year will particularly enjoy how he takes advantage of his opportunities here.

This disc (available through deannajazz.com) impresses with its range of approaches and overall spirit. Witkowski and company easily move from melodic delicacy to surging interplay with seamless assurance. This is an album that makes you feel good about music and humanity- and how they fit together.

JazzWeek

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Deanna Witkowski Length of Days (ArtistShare)

Pianist Deanna Witkowski has won over quite a few notables in a short career and even has done a *Piano Jazz* with Marian McPartland. Here leading a quartet that includes saxophonist Donny McCaslin, Witkowski highlights both her prodding playing and high plaintive voice. But whereas most pianist/singers are singers first, Witkowski is most expressive and impressive when she lets her fingers do the talking. Versed in a variety of styles, piano freaks will enjoy the taste with which she draws upon each. Highlights include her dazzling playing on "In The Still Of The Night," which even has a bit of Latin bite to it, as well as "Feed The Birds," a great tune from *Mary Poppins* that isn't looked at nearly enough.

-Tad Hendrickson