

FANFARE MAGAZINE—FEBRUARY 2010

LORRAINE FEATHER: AGES • Lorraine Feather (voc); Warren Luening (tpt); Russell Ferrante (pn); Shelly Berg (pn), Dick Hyman (pn); Michael Valerio (str bs); Grant Geissman (gtr); Eddie Arkin (gtr); Béla Fleck (bjo); Michael Shapiro (dr), (perc); Gregg Field (dr); Tony Morales (trash can), (dog bowl & perc); Bob Leatherbarrow (vib)
JAZZED MEDIA 1047 (52:47)

A Lot to Remember [Eddie Arkin/Lorraine Feather], ***Peculiar Universe*** [Béla Fleck/Lorraine Feather], ***I Forgot to Have Children*** [Shelly Berg/ Lorraine Feather], ***Old at 18/Dog Bowl*** [Eddie Arkin/Lorraine Feather], ***Perugia*** [Felix Mendelssohn/arr. Ferrante/Feather], ***Things I Learned in High School*** [Shelly Berg/ Lorraine Feather], ***Two Desperate Women in Their Late 30s*** [Russell Ferrante/ Lorraine Feather], ***The Girl with the Lazy Eye*** [Russell Ferrante/ Lorraine Feather], ***How Did We End Up Here?*** [Eddie Arkin/Lorraine Feather], ***Scrabble*** [Dick Hyman/ Lorraine Feather], ***I Always Had a Thing for You*** [Shelly Berg/ Lorraine Feather]

With *Ages*, Lorraine Feather—whether purposely or by chance—has produced her masterpiece to date. Like most of its predecessors, the CD has a theme but doesn't. By this I mean that she doesn't write song cycles, though two songs in her Fats Waller album (*New York City Drag*) had a sequential narrative, but neither are her albums merely a collection of unrelated tunes; and, like her previous album, *Language* (Jazzed Media 1032), she has moved away from mere vocalese to having songs written specifically for the lyrics she crafts.

Since Feather doesn't think of herself as a poet or writer in the artistic sense, but only as a first-rate lyricist, it's hard to tell how much of these lyrics are autobiography. Yet her liner notes state that *Two Desperate Women* is a personal reminiscence of her late friend Linda Lawley, with whom she sang backup for Petula Clark when that singer played Las Vegas, *Old at 18/Dog Bowl* is about her at that age (it had to be...I don't know one 18-year-old woman today who listens to bebop!), and *Perugia* is dedicated to her father, the late jazz critic Leonard Feather. *Scrabble* is simply one of Lorraine's adroitly crafted, tongue-in-cheek songs, like the previous album's *Where Are My Keys?*, for which she has become justly loved and admired. If you omit *Scrabble* from the mix, you're left with a collection of word-pictures describing the life, or lives, of women as they traverse this vale of tears, as the first song puts it, "from zero to sixty."

Wit and wisdom are continually juxtaposed in her lyrics. Her humor is always wry, pointed, but not vicious, just as often aimed at herself (or, at least, the character in the song) as anyone else. A perfect example is the second-funniest song in the album, *I Forgot to Have Children*. Relating the character's childless state to losing keys, lockets, and cell phones, she exudes a cheeky humor rather than sarcasm, and doesn't come down on either side of the "September moms" who abound today. Except for *Scrabble*, all the songs here generally reveal the psyche of women as they go through life, coping

with a world that often seems like a dream—good or bad—that they have trouble grasping as if it were steam. The happiness of one song is mirrored by melancholia or confusion in another. I won't even go into *The Girl With the Lazy Eye* because I can't. I both loved and feared this song: loved it for its perfect word sculpture, as if etched in Dresden china, of the young woman as social outsider, feared it because I saw much of myself at that age in it. And there's little in this music related to jazz other than a more subtle beat. It starts as a waltz and ends as one, accompanied only by solo piano, with a 4/4 bridge in the middle. It goes on for seven full minutes, yet does not sound one second too long. And I wasn't the only one who choked up on these lyrics: in the middle, you can hear Feather start to choke up, too, though she pulls herself back in time to go on and finish it.

As usual, her voice is sweet, well-tuned, and metrically fluid. Even if she weren't singing her own lyrics, Feather would be one of our best jazz vocalists; but if she *were* just singing others' songs, her art would not be half as meaningful.

In many ways, then, this is her most personal album and decidedly the most musically eclectic. Much of the jazz here is really good, featuring some outstanding solos, not often heard on her previous albums, but *Girl With the Lazy Eye* and *Perugia*, based on Mendelssohn's *Venetianisches Gondellied*, are only jazz in the sense of playing with time. This isn't to say that the music isn't good, just that it's extremely subtle. The same is true of *Peculiar Universe*, one of the most surreal tunes she has ever sung (for which I give her tremendous credit), and another song that choked me up. Since it was written by Béla Fleck as *Circus of Regrets*, it's one of the two real vocalese works on the CD (*A Lot to Remember*, based on Charlie Christian's *Waitin' for Benny*, is the other). Yet the CD's greatness lies in this very eclecticism. I was so overwhelmed by this album that it took me a full week to get my head together and write this review; I can scarcely imagine how she will follow it up. If you are open to new experiences, this album will hit you hard and, for women especially, stay with you.

Lynn René Bayley