

Jazz Aviary Review -- Bob Gish, Jazz Improv Magazine

According to Wallace Stevens there are at least thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird. The great romantic poets, too, were more than inspired by nightingales and skylarks - even crows! To be sure, the bird and the bard have long been kindred spirits, manifested too by lyricists of the great American songbook in all its extended renditions - pop, rock, country, soul, jazz, fusion, reggae, new age, you name it. It's in this birdie-liking tradition that Susan Krebs and her musical director, Rich Eames, in collaboration with the Soaring Sextet, warble, recite, whistle and orchestrate this fine, imaginative flock of sixteen tunes in musical testimony to Eubie Blake's sanguine counsel: Be grateful for luck. Pay the thunder no mind - listen to the birds. And don't hurt nobody.

Which is to say, there's certainly no hating this creative offering, just love and joy and gratitude for the inspiration which motivated this full-throated song fest. Poetry alternates with song through the compositions of Hoagy Carmichael, Johnny Mercer, Lennon and McCartney, Bob Marley, Hank Williams, Charlie Parker, Abbey Lincoln, and a covey of other artists re-perceived and covered by Krebs, Eames, Kalaf and company. What an assembly of artistry! Krebs' interpretive passion, intelligence, and love for the project can be heard throughout. Her vocals and recitations are uniformly confident and engaging. Eames, too, controls and owns each and every tune leading and directing superb performances by guitarist Scivally and flautist Lockart especially, but with the rest of the musical flock exchanging point position like a high-soaring formation of Canada geese or graceful Sandhill cranes drafting their way through the blue.

Familiar tunes such as *Skylark*, *Ornithology*, *I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry*, *Three Little Birds*, and *A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square* might take center stage for some listeners, intrigued here with just how ingeniously unfamiliar, incongruous familiarity can be. The effects of bird calls punctuating human song sound anything but campy, blending in as if the most natural of accompaniments.

The medley of Marley, Williams, and the traditional *Dinks Blues* is a case in point - all three tunes seemingly all from the same brood. *A Gaggle of Geese...What the Crow Said* leads from the reciting of a comic aviary typology into *Ornithology*, which, in turn, so appropriately precedes *Medley* in the play list, beginning with more bird calls followed by a cacophony of instruments in varying textures of volume and duration soon blending to a unison playing of the head, demonstrating one reason Parker became known as Bird - notwithstanding his predilection for a tasty yard bird now and again. And soon Scivally shines forth in long-lined, finger-licking evocations of the tune's popular contra fact. *Somewhere There's Music* indeed - and it's here!

I'm So Lonesome... features just a whippoorwill, a guitar, and Krebs. Similarly *Dink's Blues* features doves, piano, bass, softly-brushed drums, and Krebs. *Three Little Birds* is as sweet a little jazz march as could ever be heard. And what's so impressive throughout all the selections is how one tune leads naturally into the other, contributing to the thematic unity of all.

Skylark, nearly everyone's favorite bird song as far as standard go, begins simply with vocal and piano and although expectations for a larger chorus of instrumentation hold for a time, the realization soon comes that the beauty is in the simplicity. Much the same feeling results from *Bird in the Rain*, although in a more mournful mode, due in large part to the effect of MB Gordy's (*note from S.Krebs: Jerry Kalaf's actually*) sustained vibraphone. *Nightingale* modulates into a Latin rhythm, featuring Lockart and Scivally, with Krebs doing her own kind of celebration of the general soaring of the entire ensemble which is strongly felt here.

Song of the Birds appropriately has no words, per se, just a kind of Catalan scat with Krebs' call responded to by Lockart's soprano sax, Eames' keyboard, and a fade out of bird calls. It's a cool ending to a composite of many diverse songs all sounding like one. If a bird is a bird is a bird and the music of the spheres is ubiquitous, then *Jazz Aviary* is a splendid representation of bird-like precision, decisions, and unity!