

MICHELE ROSEWOMAN: WEARING HER PASSION WITH THE IN SIDE OUT

By Tomas Peña

From Oakland CA, pianist/composer/educator Michele Rosewoman began playing piano at age six. Prior to moving to New York and while still in her late teens she began playing percussion and studied Cuban/Haitian folkloric idioms. In New York Rosewoman formed new ensembles, while nurturing associations with notable New York-based artists such as Julius Hemphill, Carlos Ward, Rufus Reid, Reggie Workman, Freddie Waits, James Spaulding and Billy Hart. In the Latin music genre, Rosewoman has performed with Cuban master drummer/vocalist Orlando "Puntilla" Rios, Celia Cruz, Paquito D' Rivera, Nicky Marrero, Daniel Ponce and "Chocolate" Armenteros among others.

In 1983 she received both a National Endowment for the Arts grant for the formation of the pioneering New Yor-Uba—a fourteen-piece ensemble integrating Cuban folkloric music with cutting-edge jazz—and the ASCAP/Meet the Composer Commission, resulting in a work performed by the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra plus quintet of improvisers.

Formed in 1986, her Quintessence ensemble debuted at the Cooper Union Great Hall in New York, followed by tours in the US and abroad and four recordings on Enja Records. Rosewoman and Quintessence were the 2002-2003 recipients of the Chamber Music America/Doris Duke Jazz Ensemble Project Grant for the Creation and Presentation of New Works and 2005 recipients of the first Chamber Music America Encore Grant. In addition to five Quintessence recordings and a quartet release on Soul Note Records, Rosewoman has two trio recordings—*Occasion To Rise* (Evidence, 1993) was voted one of the year's best recordings by six critics' polls, and the critically acclaimed *Spirit* (Blue Note, 1996) was recorded live at the Montreal Jazz Festival.

Rosewoman has presented her various ensembles at major jazz festivals, concert halls and clubs throughout the US, Canada and Europe. She has composed and arranged music for contexts ranging from trio to forty-piece orchestras. As educator, current and former positions include the New School University and New York University. She teaches privately and has conducted workshops and clinics in colleges and universities throughout the US.

AAJ: Congratulations on a fine recording. It's been six years since you released *Guardians of the Light* (Enja, 2000). What have you been doing since then? .

MR: Evolving! [laughter]. With *Guardians of the Light*, as much as I like the recording and love the live energy, I reached the point where I felt like I was playing my greatest hits. It was mostly live versions of previously recorded material, with a few new compositions, and I had fallen into a pattern of performing my "easier" music because it was easier to find musicians that could play it.

I was excited by what came out when I started writing again. The music was very challenging, among other things, I was further exploring of the mysteries of the “cracks” of time, the spaces between the spaces between the beats. I held some sessions to check out some new musicians, which led me to a new configuration. We did a European tour which helped the music to formulate and settle, and then we performed at various locations in New York City. Outside of my own ensembles, I did a series of duo concerts with [saxophonist] Greg Osby. and was working with [trombonist] Robin Eubanks and his electric trio EB3, playing both keyboard and keyboard bass; a challenging setting, and I like the challenge. By the way, most people are not aware of the fact that *I enjoy being a side person*[laughter]. I just learn the material, practice it and perform my best.

AAJ: Minus the headaches?

MR: Exactly. Also, I really do appreciate opportunities to bring my best to other people’s music, as so many musicians have done for me.

My activities of the past few years have greatly contributed to my further development as a pianist and composer, and also as an educator. I stay busy in that capacity as well.

AAJ: There seems to be some confusion as to when *The In Side Out* (Advance Dance Disks, 2006) was recorded.

MR: That’s due to an omission in the CD text. It was recorded in late 2004. Which brings me to more of what has been occupying my time over the last few years.

As you know, an independent [self-produced] recording is an expensive venture. My engineer suggested that I purchase the home version of ProTools and learn how to edit on my own recording sessions, which I did. So the year 2005 headed me into many aspects of self-production and 2006 has brought them to fruition. The knowledge and skills gained in this process will prove invaluable. Having always had a record company association in the past, this was not something I had intended to do, but the more we inform ourselves and the more skills we have, the better position we are in.

AAJ: Tell me about your creative process. Is there a *modus operandi* for composing a tune?

MR: They come to me in different ways. In the case of “With You in Mind” I felt like writing something that acknowledged Duke [Ellington]. I have always been touched and inspired by his music. So I made a conscious effort to keep the feeling of the chromatic, falling melody of Duke’s “Prelude to a Kiss” in mind. The reference is extremely indirect, as intended. My choice of chords is in

Duke-like tradition, with the raised fourths and flatted ninths—which could be like Monk, but in this case, is a ballad and more like Duke. In the process, I also fell onto a harmonic idea, a minor 2nd texture. Something that Duke might have done, and it led to the overall composition.

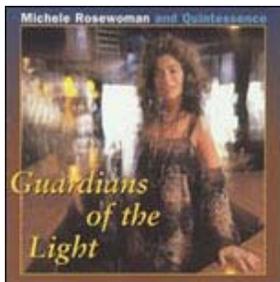
This element all by itself sounds very dissonant [demonstrates on the piano], but in this context [plays] it feels consonant. I like finding other ways to do things because sometimes it seems like everything has been done—but for sure, certain things have been done to death! [laughter].

But there are always new and interesting ways to do things, even from within the tradition. [Cuban percussionist] Pancho Quinto, God bless him, once told me that he had an idea to create a set of music using three okonkolos [the smallest of the bata drums]. He was as rooted in the tradition as anyone could be, but he was open and always jugando [playing around].

AAJ: I read something by scholar, Cornel West, where he said, “To be human at its highest level is to be at play.”

MR: That’s a beautiful saying. Special things come from this approach. My mentor, pianist/organist Ed Kelly musically expressed a lot of humor.

He loved Monk and Duke and Earl “Fatha” Hines. I think that’s the nature of these heavy traditions. They are playful with the use of rhythmic syncopation and harmonic/melodic dissonance, but in a dead serious way. Someone unfamiliar with the approach might think that an element is “off,” or arbitrary, but with mastery, where something “lays” is not accidental. It has a precise pocket, effect and a purpose.



AAJ: I was surprised to learn that Quintessence has been in existence for twenty years. What are your thoughts when you reflect on the group’s longevity?

MR: Several things come to mind; the organic progression of the personnel and the great musicians who have played with the group throughout its history, the development of an ensemble sound through the use of unique forms and improvisational possibilities, and the development of a rhythm section concept, which is very important to me and has a lot to do with the sound that we have as an ensemble. I work on this as much or more than I work on other aspects of our sound. Quintessence has always been a great context for me to develop in every way.

AAJ: And obviously a showcase for your music.

MR: And a motivation for continuously finding appropriate players.

Today, there are more musicians that can play in the vernacular with the right balance of skills and a wide spectrum of abilities—you can find that in one player more easily now.

AAJ: Why is that?

MR: I don't know, maybe the global thing that has happened to the music. Or maybe it's the growth of the music. Young players today are taking in the tradition as well as other influences—Latin, odd meters, playing conceptually as well as traditionally.

AAJ: Tell me about the new Quintessence and what prompted you to choose these particular musicians to interpret your music.

MR: I have been heading towards using guitar and tenor for years, having liked the texture of the guitar with a tenor when I did it before. It's quite different from the texture of two saxophones, which was our sound all these years. Besides playing lines and parts with the tenor, the guitar can be used as a rhythm instrument to help set up grooves, as well as to add colors and effects. The presence of the guitar encouraged me to play more groove stuff and more electric keyboard. Adding a trombone motivated me to write new material for three voices. Having that third voice allows me to achieve more layers, rhythmically and harmonically.

A further evolution in our sound has to do with the musical structures that are behind what seems to be free and dissonant. It is actually our roots in traditions combined with these structures that are giving us that freedom. On my early recordings we'd just play heads and then go [improvise]. Now I often use an underlying structure beneath the solo sections that we can obscure because we are so comfortable with it. Put another way, we understand the nuances so well that we are able to obscure the structure.

The idea of adding mystery to the music through obscuring things has always appealed to me. It also seems fundamental to the very nature of jazz, as well as to the deep rhythmic traditions of Cuba. The idea is to know something so well that you don't have to state it.

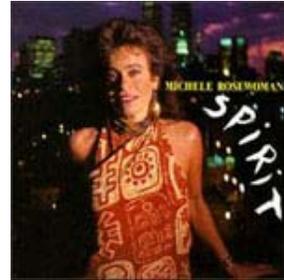
AAJ: What does each musician bring to the table?

MR: Mark Shim has been my favorite tenor player for a long time. I admire his total lack of cliché, his sound and his collaborative nature. He knows my music better than anyone else in the ensemble and the new members get a lot from him in terms of understanding concepts. Mark is a real anchor.

[Saxophonist] Miguel [Zenón] has been playing off-and-on with the group. Conceptually, we are thinking about some of the same things. And he has a

unique phrasing and energy. Miguel is also a wonderful person. Along the way, Mark encouraged me to consider musicians that I may not have thought of. He's worked with [David] Fuczyinski in the past. Fuze is an all-around guitarist. He is *inside* the instrument and very unique.

[Trombonist] Josh [Roseman] has a beautiful sound. I first worked with Josh with my New Yor-Uba ensemble and I liked the way he came in on the horn section [four horns] in terms of blend. I also liked the way he took written elements and used them as a platform for his ideas, without being confined by them. Even though I use a lot of written elements, I encourage players to take liberties with them. And it really works when they learn the material so well that the liberties they take are appropriate and rooted in the original intention. I have this in mind when I write.



Pedrito [Martinez] is a real musician, beyond being a great percussionist. He takes in the musical setting that he is a part of. He's also very personable and professional. There are only a few conga players that I have called for Quintessence. The music calls for a percussionist that knows the folklore but is not confined by it, one who will allow musical concepts and ideas to stimulate what they play. [Eddie Bobè and Eddie Rodriguez are two other percussionists] who have played with the group. I love Pedro's contribution to the two tracks.

AAJ: That would be "Eshu Laroye" and "The ER."

MR: Brad Jones is on the bass. He's a great acoustic and electric player, who opens everything up or locks it in, whatever the moment calls for. Brad is solid, collaborative, supportive and fun to play with. He enjoys the magic of the moment and the interplay.

Derrek Phillips is on the drums. Brad and Derrek have been partners for a long time and they have a good lock. Derrek is very solid, supportive and versatile.

AAJ: What is the significance of the album's title?

MR: Well, I thought of the title from a number of different angles, and it seems to be a fully reversible statement. It speaks of that which I have taken in [influences] which is outwardly manifested [through recording].

What I have internalized doesn't add up to a middle-of-the road thing, and is somewhat "out" conceptually. Also, the more subtle grooves and underlying structures of the more stretched out tracks are the inside aspect of those tracks, and so the outside stuff has some inside aspects. And the inside stuff like "The Fineness Of," which is kind of straight-up funk, has an "out" quality because of David's approach on guitar.

In terms of production, Mark Shim's use of electronic sounds and some of his drum programming add some "out" or unexpected elements to the hard groove tracks, like "The Fineness Of," "Life is for Learning" and "Guapo Remix." I have always loved pocket and groove [funk]. So with this CD, it's out [to the public] that I love the inside stuff too. I know that's taking a risk, because the jazz setting is not always accepting of that element, however, a lot of jazz musicians first played R&B and funk, including myself. It is a part of what we love and do. Since *The In Side Out* is an independent production, I took the liberty of doing all the things that I love and tried my best to do justice to each idiom.

AAJ: Let's begin with "Cuerpolarity." It sounds like a taste of things to come.

MR: There is a certain suspense to that excerpt. By opening with this excerpt, the intention was to set up a feeling of anticipation and adventure. An adventure in the sense that each track to come is so different, as well as the unpredictable course that each track takes within itself.



AAJ: Yes, the repertoire is very diverse. What prompted you write, "Don't get mad at us, we love the funk"?

MR: I have encountered resistance in the past. I know that this is such a different idiom to put on the same recording, but where am I supposed to do it? Another reason that I wanted to do it is that Mark Shim has been working with me for six years and he knows my music inside out. He has some skills and creative abilities that no one is aware of. I liked the idea of offering him a context to further apply and develop his talents. I enjoyed collaborating with him. It's my music and sometimes I feel like it's always about me, me, me! So this gave Mark an opportunity to produce. Through his efforts I was able to strongly present another side of the music that I have always been into. Oops, guess it was about me after all! [laughter].

AAJ: In recordings such as *Spirit* (Blue Note, 1996) you included material by groups such as Earth, Wind & Fire. Who are some of the others that you admire?

MR: Vocal groups—I love the voice: Marvin [Gaye], of course. Curtis Mayfield, The Temptations, The Delfonics, The Stylistics, Al Green, Sam Cook, Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight, Stevie Wonder. There are so many. It's natural for me to want to do more of the music I love. As for the R&B of today, I like Prince, D'Angelo, Maxwell and Floetry. I appreciate it when the musical setting is unique and it doesn't fall into a mold,

AAJ: Please define the term, "angular funk."

MR: For example, “Warm”—referring to the parts of it that are not in 4/4. And the horn lines—which are poppin’ and groovin’—are lopsided because they are super-syncopated and in seven.

AAJ: “Link” sounds like a conversation between the old and new Quintessence. In fact, the concept of something old vs. something is the common thread. Your version of Marvin Gaye’s “Life is for Learning” is a good example of that.

MR: There are certain cuts that clearly reflect the fact that this is an evolution and extension of the ensemble—the next chapter. Link is one of them.

AAJ: Which tracks are you referring to?

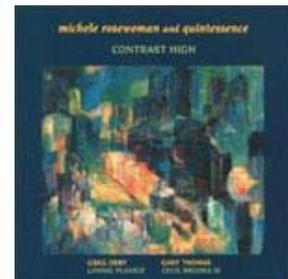
MR: I keep thinking about an earlier period of Quintessence, when I wrote what I was hearing without worrying about how hard it was going to be to get it played. I did that with the recording, *Contrast High* (Enja, 1988). There is some complicated and extremely challenging material on that recording that I don’t pull out too readily because I have to relearn it myself!

The tracks on *The In Side Out* that are an evolution of the previous Quintessence sound would be “Link,” “Advance Dance,” “Guapo” and “The ER.” “Link” has a rhythmic impetus that is the basis for our interplay. We are exploring 6/4, which is a really mysterious meter because it’s like a slow 6/8, and you can subdivide it many ways. Something about it feels really natural and I just sort of fell on it. I rarely come to stuff in a calculated way, there’s a groove in there that feels good.

In the beginning it was mysterious and we all had to get to it and learn how to play on it, but then it got so comfortable that it sounds like we are playing completely free. But there is an underlying rhythmic and harmonic structure. That’s a concept I like for Quintessence and that’s why I need players that can flex. “Advance Dance” is based on a three-and-a-half meter, but I found a place where this meter could dance. I wrote this piece initially as a means of challenging myself to get to some odd-meter stuff that comes easy to a lot of younger musicians.

AAJ: Tell me about “Guapo” [which means handsome in Spanish] and “Guapo Remix.” You describe it as a day in the life of... Just curious, a day in the life of?

MR: Any of us who wear five to ten different hats and think on multiple planes. Don’t laugh but “Guapo” was my cat. He was with me for eighteen years and he was an interesting personality on many levels and dimensions. I named this composition “Guapo,” not because it totally matched his personality musically, but based somewhat on the range of his movement



throughout the day was varied, complex, and like different episodes. He was intriguing.

So the tune is like a suite. It messes with compositional techniques such as the morphing and mutating of a melody, and a bass line used a lot of different ways at different times, and a groove that is based on a cycling bass line. There was a lot of rhythmic impetus for aspects of this piece. The re-mix is the groove section, which we thought would translate well to an electronic sound.

AAJ: “Eshu Laroye” is essentially a series of cantos [songs] that are dedicated to the deity known as Eleggua.

MR: Eleggua represents the crossroads, he sits at the door. All ceremonies are opened and closed to Eleggua. This deity is from the Yoruban pantheon of Orishas. The Orishas are messengers that govern areas of life. They personify nature and life principles. So Eleggua is very important and has accompanied me in a wonderful way throughout my life.

The thing that it is unique about “Eshu Laroye” is the fact that it is a medley of cantos for Eleggua. Usually the songs are done in sequence, and within that sequence, you either have to rob two beats to have the canto fall on the right side of the clave, or delay it (for two beats). Here, all of the folkloric elements are intact and I have made every effort to not sacrifice either aspect.

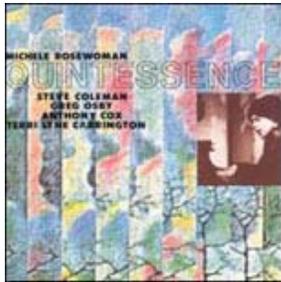
Through the years, I have worked with youth choirs, and I created vocal arrangements of everything from R&B and jazz to folkloric traditions. So I feel very comfortable arranging vocals, although this arrangement took some doing! We (myself, Pedro and Olu) are singing several parts that overlap with one another, which is accomplished through over dubbing. At times, you are hearing six to eight vocal tracks at one time. Given the fact that it is a medley, you don't want to hear the same voice hitting you in the same place in the mix, so the panning was vital to making the vocal arrangement work. Arranging the medley involved finding an effective and correct placement of the cantos against each other plus using harmonies that would achieve maximum warmth.

Years ago, I had recorded this piece in the studio with [saxophonist] David Sanchez's group, but it was never released. I was frustrated about that, however, there is always a reason why things happen. Now the tune has evolved and I ended up recording it with my own ensemble. Interestingly, it's getting a lot of air play, in spite of the fact that it's long for commercial radio. But that's Eshu! [Eleggua]

AAJ: It will be interesting to see how the traditionalists react to your arrangement. I like the way the composition segues between folkloric rhythms and jazz.

MR: I'm fairly sure that it will be appreciated on all fronts. The folklore is intact, the spirituality is conveyed. Pedro, Olu and myself are all involved in the religion and have worked with and learned from the greatest bataleros and folklorists in the country. We have all been shaped profoundly by our teacher and friend, Orlando "Puntilla" Rios.

Both Olu and Pedro have worked with New Yor-Uba over the years. Pedro has been working with me since he arrived from Cuba. I brought Olu into the studio after Pedro and I had completed all the vocal parts. But it is unnatural to hear the lead voice [agbon] singing the same part as melody in the chorus, With Olu the texture of our three voices has a clarity and warmth that I really like and I could assign the parts to our voices in a way that makes more sense and sounds more realistic.



AAJ: Let's return to Marvin Gaye's "Life is for Learning." In the liner notes for *Guardians of the Light*, you quoted Marvin. Here, you pay homage ...

MR: When I acknowledged him there, I used the lyrics from "Life is for Learning." Besides my arrangement, which is super-different from the original, Mark Shim put his stamp on it as a producer. I sang just enough lyrics to convey the message of the song.

AAJ: Before we wrap things up, what's happening with New Yor-Uba?

MR: We still have not recorded, but It's possible that this manifestation of Quintessence might open some doors. Pun or implication intended! Because that's what Elegua does.

AAJ: In my opinion, what makes New Yor-Uba so special is your ability to merge jazz and folkloric music without losing anything in the translation.

MR: That has always been my goal. That's why I continue to study everything in great depth. I could spend my whole life studying the folklore and feel fulfilled. The knowledge and the subtlety are on another plane.

In the early '70s I started seriously playing congas and percussion and absorbing Cuban folkloric drumming and vocal traditions. These drumming and vocal traditions are uncanny and otherworldly. They obviously come from God! The congas are hard on "piano hands," so I don't play as much, but my involvement with this realm remains as important to me as the jazz idiom and its impact on me is beyond words.

It was a parallel realm of musical interest for me for years, and then it all began to mesh in my dreams and in my ears. That's how New Yor-Uba came to

be. I began hearing the folkloric music in this larger setting and even though one is tradition and one is more expandable, there is a place where they come together. They can work together through careful consideration of each tradition. Also, understanding that there are commonalities is what can make it work. There is a statement that I read, from the book, *Flash of the Spirit...*

AAJ: *Flash of the Spirit*, written by Professor Robert Farris Thompson?

MR: Yes, exactly. He said that seemingly different traditions are characterized by common principles. In the case of the musics that stem from Africa, there are a lot of things in common. I always think about the subtlety, the mastery, the creativity, the discipline. This music teaches us the higher principles of life.

AAJ: I couldn't agree more.

MR: One is called on to deal with so many things and the key is balance. Balancing limitation and expansion; form with freeform; respect for and acknowledgment of tradition with a drive for creativity and evolution; aggressiveness with receptiveness, how to react and listen at the same time, incorporating the voices around you, taking the initiative. If you can get that stuff together, then perhaps there is hope that it will carry over into your overall persona. Of course, that's not always the case. There are people that have their stuff together when it comes to their instrument, but don't look too close at their personal lives!

AAJ: Any parting thoughts?

MR: With Quintessence I really strive for a unique rhythm section sound. I don't always achieve it, but there are a few tracks where the interplay is exactly what I am striving for.

AAJ: Coming from a perfectionist such as yourself, that's saying quite a lot!

MR: There is something that I look for that is very organic and there is only a handful of drummers and bass players with whom it comes together in that way. I think that "Link," "Advance Dance" and "Guapo" (in the solo sections) are good examples of a unique rhythm section approach. This aspect of our sound helps to define the group and makes us rather untraditional, because I am not looking for a time-keeping approach.

AAJ: Is *The In Side Out* available in stores?

MR: It can be purchased at [my website](#) and also at [CDBaby](#). North Country Distributors makes it available to retail outlets.

AAJ: Your music is a feast for the ears. I have no doubt that it will appeal to anyone who appreciates good music.

MR: Someone told me that people have a tendency to respond to diversity in one of two ways. In the past I have been praised for being diverse, but I have also been told that it makes it difficult for the market to define me. I can't wrap my head around the idea that I should calculate a way to get over, as opposed to continuing to grow and create music that expands the mind and the musical language.

AAJ: At the end of the day, is the material just too *deep* for commercial radio?

MR: I'm saying that it is not going to fit the traditional jazz format. The only one that might fit that format is the one for Duke, "With You in Mind."

AAJ: The fact that "Eshu Laroye" is receiving quite a bit of airplay is a good sign. Two of my favorites are "Warm" and "Life is for Learning."

MR: Aha, so you like the "fonk"!

AAJ: Moi? I love the funk! It's been a pleasure. Thank You.

MR: And I thank you Tomas.

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