

Inside Out with Michele Rosewoman

by Alain Drouot

copyright © 2007 Alain Drouot

If pianist/composer Michele Rosewoman's (too short) discography is any indication, she is a musician who doesn't like to rush and overwhelm her audience with a flurry of releases. Each new album therefore generates expectations and a high level of anticipation.

Rosewoman took her time to concoct the follow-up to *Guardians of the Light* (Enja), a live recording which came out in 2000. It took her two years to find the time to polish and complete this self-released studio recording and *The In Side Out* (Advance Dance Disques) came out in September 2006.

"Although the self-production route is draining in terms of time and finance, what I learned in the process is very empowering and will prove invaluable in the future," says the pianist. "I intend to retain ownership of all my future releases, although I hope to have a record company association for the next release-one that will offer distribution and promotion and will help foot the bill financially."

The In Side Out marks a major change in the recorded evolution of Quintessence. Rosewoman chose to present a broader spectrum of music not fully represented in previous recordings and the new release includes extensive use of the electric keyboards that she's been using for years in live situations.

These changes are immediately noticeable in the short opener "Cuerpolarity," which is packed with meaning. The title itself associates the body (cuerpo) to a spiritual and physiological force (polarity). "By opening the CD with this excerpt, we introduce electronics as an aspect of the ensemble's new direction, we announce the trombone as a third and new voice, and hopefully we musically set up a feeling of anticipation for what's to come, in terms of the diversity offered from piece to piece as well as the unpredictable course of each piece within itself," says Rosewoman. "The meter is in four-and-a-half which is the same as 9/4, but when approached as such, it stutters and mystifies. When the 9/4 is emphasized, it doesn't feel like an odd meter. This kind of signifies my approach in general, which is to create some mystery and at the same time, offer something to grab onto."

Ironically, the addition of a third voice helped the pianist in her writing process. "It gives me more to work with," she says. "In a way, it is easier to write for more instruments because I have always used compositional techniques to try and achieve a big sound with a few voices. So it was more exciting than challenging because the addition of the third voice offers more possibilities and opportunities to put rhythms against rhythms and fatten up the harmonies."

"Warm" delivers on the promises of the opener. It introduces the funk and, this time, the guitar (David Fiuczynski), which Rosewoman uses as much for color and groove as she does to play lines. On this track, as the horns play the written lines, the guitar locks in with Rosewoman's clavinet groove on electric keyboard. Angular because of the odd-meter, the composition also features Derrek Phillips in an impressive drums solo over Brad Jones' infectious electric bass line. The title also refers to her preference for achieving a warm sound with electric instruments rather than a cold and/or impersonal one. Rosewoman cites Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Wonder, and the Isley Brothers as early sources of inspiration in the use of electronics and electric instruments. "Warm" also frames Rosewoman's understanding of rhythm. "I can hear the roots and the essence of funk in the traditions of African drumming," she says, a statement that fellow pianist Randy Weston would surely second. "It is no accident for me to be playing funk if you look at how R&B and Cuban folkloric music have influenced me."

The aptly-titled "Link" harkens back to Quintessence's older sound and concept with alto sax Miguel Zenon and tenor sax Mark Shim as the main soloists. The interplay within the rhythm section is topnotch and bass lines serve to connect the piece's various sections. Also, Rosewoman's rhythmic concept gives the piece some Afro-Cuban undertones. "We're exploring the 6/4 meter, which is really mysterious because it's like a slow 6/8 meter and you can subdivide it a lot of ways," she says. "In this case, the piano's right hand is feeling the four against the six, playing right after the beat instead of on it. We felt so comfortable that it sounds like we're playing free when there is an underlying rhythmic and harmonic structure throughout." "Link" also includes a classic Rosewoman solo full of twists and turns, changes of direction, and percussive as well as melodic ornaments.

"Guapo" is in the same vein as "Link," which suggests that sequencing could have been improved upon. Although the mood doesn't change, instead of having the horns playing the written lines, Rosewoman pairs the guitar with the tenor sax. The music has also a different texture and the melody takes different shapes. "The piece is suite-like with various sections that are related through the use of a bass line and a melodic phrase that keeps permuting as it's placed in 4/4 and then in 3/4 against the bass line and then on top of a chord progression," explains Rosewoman.

The short "Guapo Remix" uses the groove section from the previous piece and is an opportunity given to Mark Shim to showcase his producing skills and deep understanding of the drum set. It is also a purposeful effort to break up the monotony of a program that would otherwise only include pieces of more or less the same time length.

Spirituality plays an essential role in Rosewoman's life and music, which is reflected in "Eshu Laroye," a composition with a suite-like format that mixes Cuban folklore and modern jazz. With significant help from percussionist Pedro Pablo Martinez, the pianist presents in fact an older piece that comes from the repertoire of her New Yor-Uba ensemble, which regrettably remains undocumented. As she achieved the New Yor-Uba sound through the use of percussion and vocal overdubs, this composition created a challenge for Rosewoman due to the vocal arrangement. "It involves a medley of cantos

or songs to the Orisha (in this case, to Eleggua) that overlap instead of following in sequence, each of which has three-part harmony," she says. "Using overdubs, each of us [Rosewoman, Martinez, and Olu Femi Mitchell] sing several parts so that at various points, one hears as many as 6-8 voices at the same time. Much thought went into correctly placing each song within clave, utilizing harmonies that would achieve the maximum warmth, and panning the vocal parts in the most effective way."

A Rosewoman album wouldn't be complete without a tribute to a jazz great. "With You In Mind (for Duke)" blurs the line between composition and improvisation. Built around a strong melody, it is a wonderful showcase for trombonist Josh Roseman and the composer's effective use of the trombone vocal quality. "I have always been moved by [Duke's] harmonic and melodic approach," she says. "While writing this piece, I kept 'Prelude to a Kiss' in my mind, but the references are purposefully indirect. The choice of chords and the altered tones-raised fours and flat nines-are Duke-like, as is the release in the bridge. Minor seconds are heavily used. When isolated, they sound very dissonant, but the context I put them in makes them feel consonant."

A Fender Rhodes showcase for Rosewoman, "The ER" is full of atmosphere and is more spacious. It features an unusual form following a harmonic progression. "It's based on a unique pattern I've been playing on the congas for years," she says. "All the bass parts and written melodic parts came from the intricacies of this pattern. When my long-time friend, percussionist Eddie Rodriguez heard it, he suggested that I write a piece based on it. I chose to name the tune after him." The guest percussionist, Pedro Martinez, grabs some of the spotlight with an idiosyncratic conga solo.

Heavy funk returns with "The Fineness Of." Fiuczynsky's humorous guitar adds another dimension to a piece that features a production shaped by Mark Shim. "The writing is based on a bass part locked with a keyboard part and on horn lines wrapped around each other," says Rosewoman. "The idea was to combine all these elements to create a strong groove."

Warm colors and textures are the main attributes of "Advance Dance," another odd-meter piece. The composition was commissioned by Chamber Music America, but is now part of Quintessence's repertoire. "I am comfortable with odd meters such as five or seven, but meters such as three-and-a-half are more mathematical and I don't tend to be approach music mathematically," she says. "My goal was just to find an inherent and organic pocket where the forward motion of the three-and-a-half meter could dance."

Rosewoman concludes with a cover of Marvin Gaye's "Life Is for Learning" off the album *In Our Lifetime*. Gaye and Motown have in fact inspired countless jazz musicians. The idea behind covering and ending with this piece was to include something less complicated and heady. The arrangement is uniquely Rosewoman and features her on vocals, and the production bears Mark Shim's stamp.

The variety of music on *The In Side Out* might take some off-guard and Rosewoman may be accused of lacking focus or direction. The critics would ultimately miss the point and

appear superficial. Repeated listens shows that there is actual consistency and recurring elements from tune to tune. Interestingly enough, it raises the issue of sound and how the way one dresses up the music sometimes obscures the actual notes. As the title suggests, intakes and influences are coming out with one's own personality. Ironically, *The In Side Out* might appear as a departure when it is arguably Rosewoman's most personal outing to date.

<http://www.jazzhouse.org/library/index.php3?read=drouot4>