



The Free Jazz Collective

Reviews of Free Jazz and Improvised Music

Patty Waters

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By Cam Scott



Vocalist Patty Waters is an icon of avant-garde jazz, in spite of her relatively slim discography. Discovered by Albert Ayler in the early sixties, her 1965 debut on ESP-Disk matches a set of her own compositions, graced with the wisdom of longing, to a scalding rendition of the Scottish folk song ‘Black is the Color of My True Love’s Hair.’ The song has been a jazz staple since Nina Simone’s sultry resuscitation, but Waters’ version is a different beast, pairing an alternately screamed and whispered vocal with tumultuous backing. Pianist Burton Greene is known for approaching the piano from the inside out, and here the entire group strains at the limits of musical idiom, maintaining a breakdown for almost a quarter hour. If the A side of ‘Sings’ is haunted, the B side is surely possessed.

In spite of only intermittent performances since her iconic recordings of the 1960s, Waters’ reputation has continued to grow, affirmed by the praise of subsequent generations of listeners and the warmth of reception that attends her few appearances. In a happy development for admirers, both of her 2018 live appearances—in Brooklyn and Houston respectively—were documented for release. Featuring Burton Greene on piano, Barry Altschul on drums, and Mario Pavone on bass, these two documents are distinctly indispensable in spite of slightly overlapping setlists; for a band of this pedigree is to be cherished.

Released by Blank Forms, a label and curatorial platform based out of New York, Live presents selections from the group’s April 5th performance at the First Unitarian Congregational Society in Brooklyn. From the first chords of ‘You’ve Changed,’ one of several standards altered forever by the voice of Billie Holiday, a mist of wistfulness envelops the listener. This is a coy choice of opener, addressing the passage of time before her multigenerational audience; and Waters sings with tremulous incredulity.

The album is almost entirely comprised of exquisitely weird, or deceptively subdued, standards; the emphatically slurred chords of ‘I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry’ purr below Greene’s fingers in response to Waters’ falling intonation, before the melody abruptly dissipates in a repetitive whimper; while Pavone and Altschul, who played together in Paul Bley’s trio, communicate deftly across a searching rendition of ‘Lover Man.’ Side A concludes with Waters’ best known composition, and the first track from her debut album, ‘Moon, Don’t Come Up Tonight.’ The melody’s chromatic descent remains as haunting here as in its initial, stripped-down version, but Greene invites the lyric’s lovesick wanderer to come inside, as it were, contributing a bluesy warmth, as Altschul embellishes Waters’ spacious phrasing with almost scalar fills and beautiful brushwork.

The album continues with a deconstructed medley of ‘Strange Fruit’ and ‘Nature Boy’—two powerfully overdetermined staples of the Great American Songbook, popularized by Billie Holiday and Nat King Cole respectively. For this central statement, the music dissolves into an array of percussive effects distributed across the entire group, making the seam between the two songs a matter of lyric discretion. This sequence links two

disparate pastorals: the upsetting scenery of 'Strange Fruit,' which describes a lynching by way of the disinterested landscape, and the mysterious visitation of 'Nature Boy,' which takes on a different, haunted character as a result. This suggestive pairing is followed by a version of Ornette Coleman's 'Lonely Woman,' featuring Waters' own words. This is one of two lyric versions in circulation; Waters' version was previously recorded with The Marzette Watts Ensemble, while another lyric by Margo Guryan has been recorded by Chris Connor, Freda Payne, Radka Toneff, and others. Here in particular, Waters' vocal weeps with a pathos that other, more restrained versions avoid; and skittish cymbals summon the inedible original.

<https://www.freejazzblog.org/2020/05/patty-waters.html>