

CLOTILDE RULLAUD LIVE AT 7 LÉZARDS

Clotilde Rullaud (voc); Hugo Lippi (gtr) Independently produced CD (42:52) available at CD Baby, iTunes or the artist's website, www.clotilderullaud.com. Live: Paris, 9/11/2006

PRINCE Kiss. DOROUGH Devil May Care. CARMICHAEL-PARISH Stardust. ELLINGTON-TIZOL-MILLS Caravan. WONDER All in Love is Fair. LENNON-McCARTNEY Blackbird. PORTER I've Got You Under My Skin. RODGERS-HART My Romance. JOBIM Luiza. One Note Samba.

"I want to be a singer or a psychoanalyst when I grow up," Clotilde Rullaud wrote (as per the Internet) in her diary as a child. Perhaps she became both. These CDs, my first exposure to her, show not only an interesting mezzo-range jazz singer with an excellent sense of rhythm, but also a singer who digs into the meaning of the words she sings. Not quite the "cool" type of singer who often seem to be the models for European jazz chanteuses, Rullaud combines the laid-back hipness of a Helen Merrill or a Sheila Jordan with the kind of emotional interpretation of lyrics that one normally associates with rock or folk singers—yet her phrasing is pure jazz. The first album listed above is a live session from 2006, the second a studio-produced album from 2009-10.

An excellent example of what I mean is Bob Dorough's "Devil may Care." I'm familiar with this tune through Dorough's own performances of it, including a late live appearance on the Prairie Home Companion radio program, and his own laid-back hip is sort of the male equivalent of Merrill or Jordan, but Rullaud invests the song with not only a more emotional interpretation of the lyrics but with a sharper rhythmic attack in her phrasing. In her hands, the song does not only swing, it jumps and thrusts, backs off and moves forward, the melodic line taking on a life of its own.

In this song, however, and those following, one notices the only chink in Rullaud's artistic armor, off-center English pronunciation. In "Stardust," sung (unusually) with the original opening verse, "nightingale" becomes "nigh-ten-gell," "fairy tale" becomes "feh-ruh-tell," etc. Yet her smoky low register (reminiscent to me of the late, great Russian folk singer Yulya) and unusual manner of shading and coloring the voice come to the fore.

She also surprises us in the Tizol-Ellington classic "Caravan" by starting it out with Arabic melismas, something you might not expect from a French singer of an American song, yet she makes it work and uses it to lead into the principal tune with ease.

In my enthusiasm for Rullaud I wouldn't want to give short shrift to the fabulous guitar playing of Hugo Lippi. Here is a guitarist whose combination of mellow chording and clean, inventive solo lines reminded me of some of the best American guitarists of the 1960s such as Tal Farlow, Wes Montgomery and Joe Pass. He's that good. The two of them create real magic out of two songs that one would otherwise consider purely rock music, Prince's "Kiss" and Stevie Wonder's "All in Love is Fair," the latter blending into the Beatles' "Blackbird" with impunity. Rullaud, in this set, scarcely ever rises above a mezzo-piano in volume, but she doesn't have to. She has such great control of the voice and her material that she holds you, fascinated, in the palm of her hand (or, more accurately, vocal cords). I was also quite delighted to hear her take "I've Got You Under My Skin" in its original rumba beat—including the tempo changes at the end of each verse—rather than the smoothed-out swing that Frank Sinatra etched into the public consciousness with this tune back in the 1950s.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a concert by solo voice and guitar, this one concludes with two songs by Antonio Carlos Jobim, sung in Portuguese, of which only the second ("One Note Samba") is well known. The duo essentially "deconstructs" "Luiza" to the point where the music evolves in bits and pieces—a mosaic put together in the mind of the listener—while "One Note Samba" begins with some wonderful scating before moving into the familiar melody.

IN EXTREMIS Clotilde Rullaud (voc, fl, background voc); Dano Haider (7-stg gtr, db); Olivier Hutman (pn, kbd); Hugo Lippi (gtr)¹; Sebastien Llado (tbn)² TZIGART 2126 (51:22)

EVANS-GAINSBOURG Waltz for Debby. GAINSBOURG La Noyée. L'Eau à la Bouche. SANTAMARIA African Sketches. RULLAUD-DELATTRE After Afro Blue. POWELL-MORAES O Canto de Ossanha. HUTMAN-RULLAUD ²This is It. HAIDER-DELATTRE ¹La Bahaina. STING Fragile. MONK-FERRO Ugly Beauty. PIAZZOLLA Oblivion. RULLAUD-LAYA Deux Cœurs Perdus. DURUFLÉ-O'DOHERTY-RULLAUD The Walk After Pie Jesu.

At the start of In Extremis, I was rather stunned to hear Rullaud turn Bill Evans's instrumental classic, "Waltz for Debby," into a song. Since she sings it in French and there is no translation in the CD booklet, I'm at a loss to know what exactly she sings, but the important thing is that she limns the familiar melody with her rich, honey-and-mead-tinged mezzo voice, and the result is warm and inviting. Mongo Santamaria's "African Sketches" is blended into a tune by Emmanuel Delattre, "After Afro Blue." Again Rullaud makes something lovely and sensual of her material, played with an extremely light touch. Here she sings mostly in French but adds a half-chorus in English before doing some nice improvising with the voice. I can't really call it scatting, even though that's what she's doing, because what she actually does here is improvise with the voice the way Anita O'Day and Sheila Jordan did so superbly. She is a worthy heir to their style and talents in this respect. In this second tune, as in the first, pianist Hutman plays a fine extended solo, and this track is an outstanding example of the way Rullaud and her musicians morph the beat, creating a swirling musical environment in which multi-meter is the norm rather than the exception.

Baden Powell's "O Canto de Ossanha" sounds almost like reggae at the very beginning, with Rullaud double-tracking herself to provide her own rhythm and lead line before the piano, 7-string guitar (playing in the bass range) and drums enter. At that point, the tempo is ramped up from a gentle reggae to a rollicking bossa nova. (I really do wish that Rullaud had provided English translations of these lyrics, however, even if online, but there doesn't appear to be any link for them.) When the song changes, so too does the rhythm, becoming a little more like "fusion light." Haider's electric guitar retains the light sound of jazz, however, and not the heavy sound of a rock musician, which is all to the good.

"This is It" begins with Rullaud talking in English, then singing in that language once again for the first chorus. This tune has very much of a fusion tinge in it, building to an almost frenzied climax. By contrast, "La Bahaina" is a jazz samba, here sung in French. Her second chorus, following the guitar solo, finds her double-tracking herself once again, this time in fast vocalese passages and ends with her pre-recorded voice scatting into the upper stratosphere. Sting's "Fragile" is taken out of its more familiar rock environment and given a true jazz treatment wherein the very light rock beat later morphs into a jazz samba. This song, naturally, is sung in English.

The last three tracks on this disc are a virtual tour-de-force for the French chanteuse. First we get Thelonious Monk's lovely waltz "Ugly Beauty" with lyrics in English. Perhaps surprisingly, though, Hutman's piano solo here sounds even more like Bill Evans than it did in "Waltz for Debby," not like Monk. Next up is Astor Piazzolla's tango "Oblivion," taken at an extraordinarily relaxed tempo which, personally, I found much more appealing than the original pace. Rullaud limns the odd melody with wordless vocalizing, floating the voice on what seems like an endless flow of breath. This track, too, is a medley, later morphing into her original composition "Deux Cœurs Perdus." The beat of the latter is different, more of a jazz ballad, and again she sings in French. The last track, given the longish title "The Walk After Pie Jesu from Maurice Duruflé," takes the French

composer's piece and completely transforms it into a jazz ballad. Indeed, it is extremely difficult to hear Duruflé in this treatment, as the music is so changed as to make the original all but disappear. Most of this transformation is rhythmic, of course, but in the permutation of rhythm Rullaud and her rhythm section wash it in jazz coloration. Thus does *In Extremis* conclude, not with a bang or a whimper but with soft, low murmurs, caressing the listener's ear in a guitar diminuendo.

French critics seem to compare Rullaud, often, to a now-deceased singer named Claude Nougaro, with whose work I am unfamiliar, but simply taken on her own merits Rullaud is an extraordinary talent. If I have a preference for *Live at 7 Lézards* it is only because I feel the "live" setting brings out a livelier response in the singer, a more spontaneous sense of creation in the moment, but there is a great deal to admire in the overlaid tracks and musical smorgasbord on *In Extremis*. Haider's electric guitar retains the light sound of jazz, however, and not the heavy sound of a rock musician, which is all to the good.

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Emmanuel Delattre, "After Afro Blue." Again Rullaud makes something lovely and sensual of her material, played with an extremely light touch. Here she sings mostly in French but adds a half-chorus in *Cœurs Perdus*." The beat of the latter is different, more of a jazz ballad, and again she sings in French. The last track, given the longish title "The Walk After Pie Jesu from Maurice Duruflé," takes the French composer's piece and completely transforms it into a jazz ballad. Indeed, it is extremely difficult to hear Duruflé in this treatment, as the music is so changed as to make the original all but disappear. Most of this transformation is rhythmic, of course, but in the permutation of rhythm Rullaud and her rhythm section wash it in jazz coloration. Thus does *In Extremis* conclude, not with a bang or a whimper but with soft, low murmurs, caressing the listener's ear in a guitar diminuendo.

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