

Sophisticated Ladies

Charlie Haden Quartet West (Emarcy-Decca)
by Joel Roberts

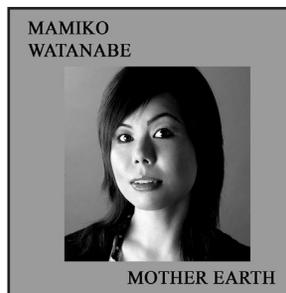
While he earned his reputation on the cutting edge of jazz, holding down the bass chair in Ornette Coleman's trailblazing '60s quartet and leading the musically and politically radical Liberation Music Orchestra, Charlie Haden is a romantic at heart. And for the past 25 years, he's fueled his romantic urges, as well as his nostalgia for the legendary days of Hollywood, by revisiting classic love songs and ballads with his Quartet West.

For the quartet's ninth release, Haden has enlisted some of the top female singers in jazz (and some from outside the jazz world) along with a string orchestra, to augment his stellar core group of Alan Broadbent (piano), Ernie Watts (tenor sax) and Rodney Green (who succeeds the ailing LA veteran Larance Marable) on drums. The 12 tunes alternate between vocal numbers and instrumentals, opening strongly with Melody Gardot's breathlessly emotional reading of "If I'm Lucky". Some of the material is familiar, but much of it is obscure, including "My Love and I", a haunting tune from the 1962 movie *Apache*, which had previously only been recorded (by Coleman Hawkins) as an instrumental. Haden unearthed some never-before-recorded lyrics by Johnny Mercer, which get their

debut here in a rich, smoky rendition by Cassandra Wilson. All the vocals except for Norah Jones' sultry "Ill Wind" feature lush string arrangements by Broadbent while all the instrumentals, besides the gorgeous Ellington title tune, are delivered without strings. Jones, to her credit, shows more emotional range here than in her pleasant but rarely inspiring pop material while opera star Renee Fleming proves she has jazz chops to spare on "A Love Like This".

The instrumental numbers are all delights, performed with calm assuredness by the veteran band, especially "My Old Flame", including an extended opening solo from Haden, and the title track, featuring Watts' most spirited soloing. Of special note is a lovely treatment of Hank Jones' "Angel Face", a tune the pianist recorded with Abbey Lincoln, which serves as a touching tribute to the two recently deceased masters. The album closes with a hard-charging quartet take on the bebop gem "Wahoo", a refreshingly upbeat ending to this captivating exercise in elegance and restraint.

For more information, visit deccarecords-us.com. Haden is at Birdland Mar. 22nd-26th. See Calendar.



Mother Earth
Mamiko Watanabe (s/r)
by Terrell Holmes

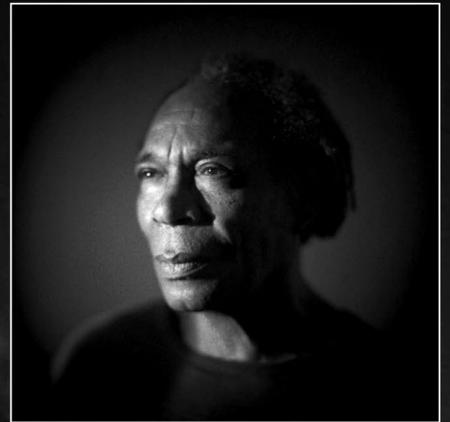
In an era where "going green" has become one of our most prominent and important mottoes, jazz may have in *Mother Earth* a fine concept album that pays tribute to our planet. Comprised mainly of original songs, this paean to the planet's beauty is played with fire and sensitivity by this stellar pianist and her band.

Watanabe sprints off the blocks immediately with the Latin burner "A Little Piece for Dance—Mother Earth". She's a dynamo on the keys, whipping up dazzling runs with Ameen Saleem and Francisco Mela percolating on bass and drums alongside her. The band's bouncing rendition of "I Remember You" transforms into a ditty suggesting grinning recollections of good times instead of misty, watercolor memories. The ballad "Lake" contains whispers of "Blue in Green" and Watanabe's tender styling shimmers like ripples on its surface.

Watanabe takes a fabulous approach to "In a Mellow Tone". By aggressively changing the key, time signature and tempo she creates a fresh version of a standard - think of Ellington through the lens of Herbie Hancock. Kevin Louis' dreamy flugelhorn and Saleem's plucked solo with an ocean-deep tone lie at the center of the ruminative "The Moon Was Reflected on the Sea". Louis also plays on "Verdure", an uptempo piece, in a classic bop vein, on which Watanabe shows her impressive skills as a composer. And Watanabe puts some challenging wrinkles in "Just Making It"; Louis' cornet and Mela's drumming truly bring out this tune's funk-based character.

Watanabe is a pleasantly restless sojourner who explores every possibility a song has to offer, then exploits it wonderfully. She's as deft and light-fingered as a pickpocket as she plays flawless, concerto-quality piano. Throughout *Mother Earth* Watanabe displays talents as a pianist, composer and arranger that makes a listener smile and shake their head with the pleasure of it all. And on this disc, the pleasures are many.

For more information, visit mamikowatanabe.com. Watanabe is at The Kitano Tuesdays in March. See Calendar.



JACQUES COURSIL
TRAILS OF TEARS

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Bobby Few piano
Alex Bernard bass
Alan Silva bass
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Sunny Murray drums

Leaving the world of music for academia many years ago, trumpeter Jacques Coursil invested considerable time in the study of colonialism and its effect on distressed populations. Coursil has since resumed playing in earnest, with his studies as inspiration, and his new music is showcased well on *Trails of Tears*. The intent of this powerful recording is to express the emotion of displacement and loss on the Cherokee tribe that was forcibly removed from their native homeland in the 1830s (the trail of tears) and the response from those of African heritage who were enslaved in the territory that the Cherokees were driven from. The performance is enhanced by the presence of luminaries from the free jazz world, including drummer Sunny Murray, clarinetist Perry Robinson, saxophonist Mark Whitecage, bassist Alan Silva, and pianist Bobby Few. Coursil's lovely trumpet voice, along with inspired performances by all involved, makes *Trails of Tears* a moving musical experience.

JACQUES COURSIL TRAILS OF TEARS



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