

Esther Kaiser Celebrates Abbey Lincoln



To record the music of Abbey Lincoln is a very brave undertaking and not many musicians have taken on the dramatic, often political statements and witty lyricism of this timeless artist. In 2013, her former pianist Marc Cary released a beautiful solo homage called “For The Love Of Abbey”. And now comes German singer Esther Kaiser who studied at Berlin’s Hanns Eisler school of music and whose first album came out in 2004.

“Learning How To Listen – the Music of Abbey Lincoln” will be released on Friday and features 10 of Lincoln’s best tracks from her late period plus three short takes of one of her signature songs which was composed by Thelonious Monk with lyrics by Lincoln: “Blue Monk”. The album starts off with the title track which Lincoln first recorded on her 1998 album “Wholly Earth” and on her last album before her death,

on the 2007 release “Abbey Sings Abbey”. Esther adds a nice and gentle guitar color to the song courtesy of Rüdiger Krause and wonderfully opens her latest project with a very sophisticated vocal.

There is also the vibes and marimba player Franz Bauer who is featured prominently on “Conversation With A Baby” for example. A direct comparison to Lincoln’s record which has Bobby Hutcherson playing the vibes and marimba part reveals one of the fine aspects of this recording: Esther treats the almost holy compositions with respect; she is interpreting them in the truest sense and not just simply covering the songs. The song is preceded here by Charlie Haden’s “First Song”. And where Lincoln had the Staple Singers wailing “The Music Is The Magic” and Stanley Turrentine belting his tenor sax, Kaiser strips the song down to the essentials with a warm touch by Bauer.

For me, her “And It’s Supposed To Be Love” is not convincing, though. It had a somewhat contradictory, light and easygoing rhythm on both Lincoln versions: the earlier one with singer Maggie Brown and the latter one with a beautiful accordion by Gil Goldstein added to the dark and tragic lyric (“Something dark is going on, going on for years”). And it is exactly that contradiction that is gone on Kaiser’s version because hers is a very fierce and crashing version at first suiting the lyric better of course but the cynicism of Lincoln’s original is lost.

But with almost all of the other interpretations here, the concept works well for Kaiser. Her voice is simply beautiful on “Love Has Gone Away” and “A Turtle’s Dream” (the former also has wonderful accordion accompaniment by Tino Derado and doesn’t have to hide behind Gil Goldstein).

So even though seven of the pieces here were recorded again for Lincoln’s final album with a new band and instrumentation, it is of course worth checking out all of Lincoln’s original material again. And Esther Kaiser has proven that it is possible to take on the work of one of the greatest composers and singers there ever was. And to succeed with it. I’m glad that she didn’t change the mood and wit of one of my favorite Lincoln compositions “Throw It Away”: “Cause you can never lose a thing if it belongs to you”.

I would suggest a Volume 2 with some tracks of the brilliant “You Gotta Pay The Band” album from 1991 thrown in.

Esther Kaiser will celebrate the record release with a concert on Friday at Berlin’s B-Flat and there are also concerts scheduled in Nürnberg, Brelingen, Lübeck, Kiel, Hamburg, Bamberg, Rostock, Dresden, München (see events).