

Paula West - Live At Jazz Standard (2012)

Written by bluesever

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1 *Baltimore Oriole* 9:37 2 *Like A Rolling Stone* 8:00 3 *Wichita Lineman* 6:10 4
Romance In The Dark 7:12 5 *Man Wanted* 2:59 6 *Nature Boy* 6:33 7 *Don't Think Twice*
4:46 8 *Where Flamingos Fly* 6:37 9 *Pocketful Of Miracles* 3:57 10 *Softly As In A Morning*
Sunrise 5:39 11 *My Romance* 5:16 Paula West - vocals George Mesterhazy - piano Ed
Cherry - guitar Barak Mori - bass Jerome Jennings - drums

Devotees of superior jazz vocalists have several reasons to rejoice about this fourth CD by the highly respected San Francisco-based Paula West. First and foremost, the recording is simply a true knockout; but the rejoicing is also because, despite rave audiences and reviews for over a decade, this is West's first release since the impressively executed *Come What May* (High Horse) in 2001.

Recorded during an engagement at New York City's Jazz Standard in 2011, it features stellar but recently departed pianist/arranger George Mesterhazy's quartet (including guitarist Ed Cherry), the excellent band with which she has long collaborated. Those hearing West for the first time will be struck initially by her unusually strong and rich vocal instrument, with breath control, purity of tone and pitch to die for. But these eleven tracks reveal far more riches.

As expected with melodic jazz storytellers, the *Great American Songbook* is a significant part of West's material. But two other sources furnish the opportunity for interestingly different interpretations and moods: 1940s black hits and 1960s rock and pop.

The opener, Hoagy Carmichael's classic "Baltimore Oriole"—taken at a jaunty medium tempo featuring drums, bass and guitar—finds West embarking on a sensually exhilarating ride. An

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optimistically voiced "Pocketful of Miracles" and spiritually uplifting "Softly As in a Morning Sunrise" likewise showcase smoothly invigorating handling of different tempos. And the ballads—"Nature Boy," "Where Flamingos Fly" and Rodgers and Hart's "My Romance"—are beautifully poignant.

The older African-American material is very stimulating, including a deliberate and intimately inviting version of Lillian "Lil" Green's 1940 blues composition and major hit, "Romance in the Dark," and Leonard Feather's earthy, boldly projected and irresistibly swinging "Man Wanted," originally written for the incomparable (but sadly neglected) Ethel Waters, for whom West has shown a strong affinity.

The contemporary material here is Jimmy Webb's "Wichita Lineman," taken at a yearning, slow-burning tempo supported by Barak Mori's bowed bass; Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone," where West digs into the dramatic lyrics with the building intensity of a steamroller; and the gently philosophical "Don't Think Twice," another Dylan tune (clearly a favorite for West), sung expressively and memorably with her deep, dark satin timbre.

Regardless of the material, the most lasting quality resonating on Live at Jazz Standard is West's serenely knowing sense of command that's very natural and very moving. ---Tom Pierce, allaboutjazz.com

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