

Cassandra Wilson - Loverly (2008)

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01. *Lover Come Back To Me*
02. *Black Orpheus*
03. *Wouldn't It Be Loverly*
04. *Gone With The Wind*
05. *Caravan*
06. *Till There Was You*
07. *Spring Can Really Hang You Up The Most*
08. *Arere*
09. *St. James Infirmary*
10. *Dust My Broom*
11. *Very Thought Of You*
12. *Sleepin' Bee*

Cassandra Wilson - Vocals Lekan Babalola - Percussion Jason Moran - Piano Lonnie Plaxico - Bass (Upright) Rhonda Richmond - Vocals (Background) Herlin Riley - Drums Reginald Veal - Bass (Upright)

Vocalist Cassandra Wilson has used her 15 years at Blue Note to explore the interpretive range of her voice, whether singing tunes by Van Morrison, Robert Johnson, Lewis Allan, Miles Davis, or Hoagy Carmichael. In many ways, Wilson has offered a new view of the standard by using classic rock and Delta blues tunes in her live and recorded repertoires. That said, *Loverly* is her first offering comprised almost completely of American songbook standards since *Blue Skies* 20 years ago. Wilson produced the recording in Jackson, MS, and surrounded herself with old friends: guitarist Marvin Sewell, bassists Reggie Veal and Lonnie Plaxico, drummer Herlin Riley, and labelmate and pianist Jason Moran. The material is beautifully chosen; it ranges from Oscar Hammerstein's "Lover Come Back to Me" and Luiz Bonfá's "A Day In The Life Of A Fool" (the English version of "Black Orpheus") to Juan Tizol's "Caravan," Irving Mills' "St. James Infirmary," and Ray Noble's "The Very Thought of You." Given Wilson's working methods, these standards are performed in iconic ways -- without losing the central integrity of their sources. A prime example would be "Caravan," where the basic rhythmic pulse has been doubled with a

snare, hi-hat, and taut, edgy piano. Wilson offers the melody as written, but with her own stretched-line phrasing applied to the lyric. "Lover Come Back to Me" carries within it the gentle bounce of the original, and Wilson evokes both Nina Simone and Betty Carter in her rhythmic approach to the lyric and melody. The warm double-time guitar strut of Sewell paces the track; Moran's solo walks a line between show tune formalism and vanguard improv that is fresh and exciting. The reading of "Black Orpheus" here is unusual: Wilson is very conservative in her approach to the melody, so much so that the beautiful Portuguese "saudade" element is texturally amplified and bossa is stretched to the breaking point. The band's meld of subtle Afro-Latin rhythms evokes Cuban son, and conserves the root elements in the original. The duet between Sewell's truly unique acoustic guitar style and Wilson's vocal on "Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most" is utterly tender. A pair of left-field cuts are here as well. First is a group improvisation called "Arere." Propelled by a hypnotic, nearly funky upright bassline, Sewell plays short choppy chords with Afro-Cuban percussion in the backdrop; Moran plays around and through the polyrhythms as Wilson sings and speaks -- she improvises with the band in a number of different languages. Strangely, it doesn't feel out of place here. The other ringer is a read on Elmore James' trademark blues "Dust My Broom." It is not offered as the raucous barroom wailer it classically is. Instead, it's snaky, sultry, and steamy. Sewell's edgy, razored slide guitar, hand percussion, and Wilson's finger snaps accompany her voice on the first verses, establishing a groove before the rest of the band enters. Her phrasing is pure sassy soul that gradually takes this blues firmly into the jazz camp. Wilson has done what many other singers -- many of them on Blue Note -- couldn't even envision: she has taken a substantial part of the American songbook, employed a crack, risk-taking jazz group, and added new depth, texture, and meaning to these songs, without sacrificing their elegance or appeal. Loverly is the only reason to avoid imposing a moratorium on the very tired standards genre that has become the bane of jazz in recent years. It cannot be recommended highly enough. ---Thom Jurek

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