

Randy Weston - Earth Birth (1997)

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01. *Earth Birth* 02. *Pam's Waltz* 03. *Little Niles* 04. *Babe's Blues* 05. *Where* 06. *Hi-Fly* 07. *Portrait of Billie Holiday* 08. *Berkshire Blues* 09. *Portrait of Vivian* Randy Weston - piano, Christian McBride - bass, Billy Higgins - drums, Orchestre du Festival de Jazz de Montreal.

Recorded in Montreal with 24 strings from the Montreal Symphony and two can't-miss jazz cohorts, bassist Christian McBride and drummer Billy Higgins, here we have another reunion between Weston and arranger Melba Liston in a collection of mostly early Weston tunes, some dating back to the early 1950s. The strings sound unearthly, as if they were recorded in a dead studio (the locale is the Ludget-Duvernay Hall of Montreal's Monument National), and even though Liston blends them with the piano in an integral manner, they respond stiffly; it's an uneasy, not terribly imaginative fusion. The most famous Weston tune, "Hi-Fly," is completely retooled into a cocktail-hour ballad -- it also features quite an intricate string chart -- and composer Weston enjoys poking around the tune's angles and corners. Coming after his exciting African experiments in the '90s, this CD, despite Weston's sharply etched solos, is a relatively minor nostalgic effort. --- Richard S. Ginell, Rovi

During his 40-something years as a musician, pianist Weston has incorporated various influences in his playing-primarily elements of African music he studied and later acquired during his lengthy stay in Tangier, where he ran the Africans Rhythm Club for five years about 30 years ago. He also came under the sway of Thelonious Monk or, as he told Len Lyons (in his 1983 book, *The Great Pianists*), "Monk entered my soul."

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Much of that is ever present in his playing; however, the African sources are less evident on this collection of his compositions recorded with bassist Christian McBride, drummer Billy Higgins and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra at the 1995 Montreal Jazz Festival. In the liner notes Weston says, "The overall concept of the CD is love, romance and the beauty of life. It's something to slow you down, make you appreciate the finer things of life."

With the Symphony's 24 strings providing shading, intriguing undercurrents of sound and splashes of tonal color and with marvelous arrangements by Melba Liston, Weston gives us classic interpretations of such tunes as the title track ("My First Song"), written to honor the birth of his daughter, Pam, and son, Niles, who were also memorialized by "Pam's Waltz" and "Little Niles," both of which are on the disc. "Little Niles," one of four waltzes here, receives a particularly nice reading with the strings digging into the tune in stately style.

"Babe's Blues," another of the waltzes here that was written for children, gets an enjoyably Monkish treatment. "Where" is a spiritual played by the trio. "Berkshire Blues," the only uptempo piece, is a cheery item written to celebrate that area of Massachusetts that's home to the Music Inn, where, in the early '50s, Weston was the breakfast cook (!) and the after-dinner pianist. Two portraits-of his mother, Vivian, and Billie Holiday-are tender pieces with Holiday's getting an especially lush, wistful string accompaniment. "Hi-Fly," perhaps Weston's best-known tune, is played as a very relaxed ballad. On a collection of standout performances, it stands out above all the others; at 10:29 (it's the longest piece) Weston and Liston obviously thought so, too. This is an excellently recorded disc and Weston's rich piano sound is heard to great advantage. ---Miles Jordan, jazztimes.com

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