

BILL CHARLAP & RENEE ROSNES

It is with no small dosage of irony that highly acclaimed jazz pianists **Bill Charlap** and **Renee Rosnes** close their dynamic new duo piano album with the timeless standard “Never Will I Marry.” Marry, they have, and happily marry, they do—in musical terms— on **Double Portrait**, a high point in their respective careers, and the first recorded example of what must be considered one of the finest and most empathetic piano duos in jazz history. Double Portrait is a work of significance and depth, but also flows with the casual and organic quality of musicians with an uncommon simpatico, in life as well as in art.

Charlap views the musical results captured on Double Portrait as “a natural evolution of who we are as musicians. We have complementary touches, harmonic language and time feels. That’s not to say that they are one and the same, because they’re not. Our differences and similarities blend together to create a unique sound that is the sum of both of us. We think as one musical entity. At some points, I can’t even remember who is doing what.”

Double Portrait is the latest, and another proud entry, in a series of stellar projects on Blue Note for Charlap in the past decade, including readings of music by Leonard Bernstein and George Gershwin, and another special family project, with his mother, singer Sandy Stewart. In another musical family tree link, the pianist’s father was famed Broadway composer Moose Charlap. Charlap the Younger has earned the respect of critics and discerning listeners, and the praise of musicians such as Tony Bennett, who the pianist has also worked with.

Rosnes, who originally hails from Vancouver, has been a prominent figure in NYC and the international jazz scene for many years. She has recorded fourteen fine albums as a leader, nine of them for Blue Note, and has been the pianist of choice for such artists as Joe Henderson, Wayne Shorter, JJ Johnson and Bobby Hutcherson. Rosnes is also a founding member of the dynamic SFJAZZ Collective, with whom she performed and recorded for six years.

Both pianists have been praised for representing the upper echelon of contemporary jazz piano aesthetics. Fittingly, TIME magazine once noted in a review that Charlap “approaches a song the way a lover approaches his beloved. He wants to view it from every angle—melody, harmony, lyrics, verse.” Rosnes was cited by the New York Times as “a virtuoso,” also noting that, in a concert, “no rhythmic inflection went unexplored.”

After marrying in 2007, the couple has subsequently performed live in duo format, and with Double Portrait, says Charlap, “finally, the time came that we were able to set it down for posterity. It’s a natural for us, both being admirers of each other’s work. The chemistry we have as husband and wife is naturally reflected in our music, and likewise, the chemistry we have as musicians is a part of our lives together.”

Rosnes points out that the piano duo format requires “a delicate balance, and a heightened sense of listening as well as orchestral thinking. When twenty fingers are involved, there’s a high potential for musical clutter. Bill and I innately seem to search for clarity, and always try to put the music first.”

In this case, a natural flow of communication between them made the sometimes-fragile prospect of two pianos especially seamless. As Charlap notes, “we didn’t say, ‘if you play this, I’ll play that.’ It’s more intuitive than that. When we sit down to play together, we trust our instincts and the musical result is organic.”

The music was recorded between Christmas and New Years in the acoustically inspiring Kaufmann Concert Hall of the 92nd Y, a venue Charlap and Rosnes have both had a long connection to as performers, and Charlap as Artistic Director of the summer concert series, Jazz in July. Double Portrait winds up being a unique expression of the artistry of each player, and an added third persona rises out of the interactive blend of the two players. For repertoire, the couple selected a diverse yet perfectly coherent range of material to explore and find mutual expression on. In the song selection, as in their approach to playing together, the pair let well-honed instincts be the guide. “There are many facets that are represented in our musical psyches, yet they do fit together. It tells a story, and yet it doesn’t sound, to my ear, as if it’s eclectic, in the sense that it’s putting on different hats. It’s all of a piece.”

Double Portrait opens on Brazilian-flavored terrain, with pianist Lyle Mays’ rippling “Chorinho” and Jobim’s “Double Rainbow.” Along the way, they touch on music of jazz legends each has performed with, including Rosnes with Wayne Shorter (“Ana Maria”) and Joe Henderson (“Inner Urge”), and Charlap’s past playing with Gerry Mulligan (“Little Glory”).

From outside the conventional jazz and standard song form, from the pen of Rosnes, comes the structurally intriguing piece “The Saros Cycle,” the title which relates to the prediction of the cycles of eclipses. As Rosnes explains, “The melody has a cyclical framework, and I was searching for a name that reflected that feeling. I’m interested in astronomy, so I often find inspiration there. Over the years, I’ve written quite a few pieces with cosmological titles, such as ‘Orion’s Belt,’ ‘Black Holes,’ ‘Malaga Moon’ and ‘Aurora Borealis.’

Charlap exudes that Rosnes is “a true composer. She doesn’t write melodies on top of harmonies and she doesn’t write harmony just to make it work with the melody. The melody and the harmony are cast; they are in equal proportion to each other. The Saros Cycle is one of my favorites compositions of Renee’s.”

Naturally, the great American songwriters are also important to both musicians, and here, the duo also sheds emotionally and musically sensitive light on Gershwin’s “Man’s Gone Now” and Dietz and Schwartz’s “Dancing in the Dark,” completing the varied picture of the album’s song set. Charlap has been noted for his deep diving into the essence of a song in his interpretations, something he shares with his wife.

As for the album’s winking coup de grace of “Never Will I Marry,” Charlap points out that it’s “a tune we love, and certainly a tongue-in-cheek title for us.” He also comments, “one of the things I enjoy about the track is that it’s a conversation all the way through.” The refined and ever-fresh art of conversation is among the fine points making Double Portrait one of this season’s prize jazz recordings, not to mention a new pinnacle in the ranks of two-piano recordings.

On this album, as with other musical work, Charlap says, “you’re looking for magic moments more than you’re looking for a ‘perfect chorus.’ We’re lucky to have the recording process to document those moments that would just disappear into thin air. It’s exciting to capture something spontaneous that only happens once. There are many of those moments on this recording.”

While both musicians continue to tend their personal musical lives and projects, the Charlap-Rosnes piano duo persona is now officially an ongoing venture, documented for the first time, for the ages.