

RECORDINGS; The Tough Road of Black Women

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

To be fair, older black music is often more than obscure; discussing the early work of the gifted and funny pianist and singer Martha Davis is tough if Ms. Davis (who made \$100,000 in 1958 from records and personal appearances) isn't mentioned in any standard reference books and her records couldn't be found until the recent release of "You're on the Right Track, Baby" (Jukebox Lil JB-1104/Down Home Music, 10341 San Pablo Avenue, El Cerrito, Calif. 94530). This is a shame, because the more voices heard from all angles - whether Ms. Davis or the majestic women gospel masters on "Gospel Warriors" (Spirit Faith SF 1003), or the women prisoners performing on "Jailhouse Blues" (Rosetta Records RR1316) -the clearer a picture we get of what constitutes the American experience. Beyond the continuing musical pleasure to be gained from Ms. Davis and her Torrid Trio and the others, the recordings carry the murmur of history.

The tunes she wrote for herself are standard blues declarations of a woman's independence, valuable and heartening, but rote by the time they were recorded, and expected from a woman performer. Even a tune called "Kitchen Blues," with the lyrics "I got the get-up-in-the-morning-and-fix-the-boss-break fast blues," was written by men.

Prisons are repositories of archaic styles, and the 24 performances -everything from game songs to sewing songs and personal testimonials - are dripping with melodies that seem to come straight from Africa by way of Mississippi field hollers. These are songs sung by women whose parents might have been born into slavery. Mattie Mae Thomas makes herself clear in her "Dangerous Blues." "You keep talking 'bout the dangerous blues, if I had a pistol, I'd be dangerous too. You may be a bully, but. . . I'll fix you so you won't gimme no mo' trouble in the world. . . Mattie had a baby and he got blue eyes, it must be the captain, he was hanging around."

FULL TEXT

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For the most part, this re-examination hasn't happened on the women's side of black popular music. The usual suspects that have tended to hinder the celebration of black music generally - academic indifference to popular culture, racism, class snobbery - are all there. But in the women's case they are joined by the stifling male dominance of the music industry, as well as its chaotic legal and commercial nature. Combined, they've kept a large-scale re-examination of black women's music from becoming an industry as it has in the other arts.

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release of "You're on the Right Track, Baby" (Jukebox Lil JB-1104/Down Home Music, 10341 San Pablo Avenue, El Cerrito, Calif. 94530). This is a shame, because the more voices heard from all angles - whether Ms. Davis or the majestic women gospel masters on "Gospel Warriors" (Spirit Faith SF 1003), or the women prisoners performing on "Jailhouse Blues" (Rosetta Records RR1316) - the clearer a picture we get of what constitutes the American experience. Beyond the continuing musical pleasure to be gained from Ms. Davis and her Torrid Trio and the others, the recordings carry the murmur of history.

The release of Ms. Davis's record (like the others, on LP only) starts her on the road to rediscovery. The album collects 17 of the tracks - rocking blues, ballads and standards - she made between her first record date, in 1946, and December 1951, and they swing hard. By the time she started recording in the mid-40's, the big bands were on their way to obscurity, and smaller jump groups had taken over their duties. Small bands like Ms. Davis's roped in the riffing power of the big orchestras, and they managed to keep jazz virtuosity within the context of entertainment.

It would be nice to say that the collection reflects the predicament of being a woman and a black in the 40's and 50's, but on an overt level it doesn't. While Ms. Davis's group sounds better than many of the tough little jump bands working during that period, it is still largely within the style of the time. Though some of her songs come from a woman's point of view, the medium demanded primarily danceable tempos dosed with blues, occasional novelty numbers and ballads - it didn't demand either autobiography or introspection.

The tunes she wrote for herself are standard blues declarations of a woman's independence, valuable and heartening, but rote by the time they were recorded, and expected from a woman performer. Even a tune called "Kitchen Blues," with the lyrics "I got the get-up-in-the-morning-and-fix-the-boss-break fast blues," was written by men.

If Ms. Davis's lyrics, and the songs she chose (or was given by producers to sing), mask her real intent, giving her an inscrutable air behind all the mirth, then her piano playing, and the tightly controlled and musically sophisticated arrangements of the tunes, pull off the mask. If she was doing the tunes the market demanded, she would nevertheless slip in her own commentary during the improvisations, showing how creative she could be; the tension in her work comes from the interaction of her commercial intent and her often brilliant piano playing. Virtually every tune has a perfectly shaped (if occasionally out of tune) piano solo, from boogie woogie compositions to straight-ahead swing; she breaks up the lines of her solos with thunderous bass jabs, often following with passages of bittersweet bebop chords. Her solos are like a topographical map, jagged with peaks and valleys. She's not effortless; instead, she's obviously thoughtful, working melodic ideas into contortions, figuring things out, making sure that no phrase is left uncommented on. Humor informs them, but there's something tragic about them as well: it's hard not to feel that Ms. Davis knew a lot more about music and life than what she gives us. The tunes, as good as they are, seem like signs of quashed ambition.

If Ms. Davis has had no modern reputation and no reissues until recently, the singers on "Gospel Warriors," a compilation spanning the years 1931 to 1982, are all reputation, with little proof of their greatness readily available on record. Featuring the women gospel singers Marion Williams, Clara Ward the Georgia Peach and five others, it goes a long way in filling the blank areas of women's musical and social experience in America, bringing back stunning singers whose careers were nudged out of the way by the predominance of male quartets or group styles of singing - the gospel church is notoriously patriarchal. It is also a document of the most technically ornate and emotionally charged singing American culture has produced.

These are hymns sung by soloists - not in front of a choir or a group, but usually accompanied by simply a piano

and organ. Most of the tunes are molasses slow; they're not meant for dancing and they don't have any of the liberating quality of a full-blown gospel performance. They're star vehicles for singers to show their spirit and technique. As in Ms. Davis's case, the context kills autobiographical or individual expression. Not one of the songs presents a female point of view. But there's more than an average amount of pride in these performances: pride in technique and virtuosic performance, pride in faith.

Mary Johnson Davis's "He Satisfies," recorded in 1949, is a good example. It's achingly slow, and she places every note with the deliberateness of someone fitting a flower into a still life. Ms. Davis, often called the single most influential gospel soloist, has a vibrato that quivers as fast as a snake's tongue flicks, and she sings with a quasi-operatic stand-offishness brought on by her immense technique. By the time she finishes the performance, it's a blur of detail, with hardly a note left unbothered by melismas and soaring falsettos.

While music cloaked in economics or faith is hard to interpret, the music on "Jailhouse Blues" (Rosetta Records RR1316), recorded in 1936-39 in the sewing room of the legendarily cruel Parchman Penitentiary in Mississippi, leaves no doubt about who is singing about what. Most studies of prison music focus on men's singing; according to Rosetta Reitz of Rosetta Records, this is the first recording of songs by women prisoners ever released, and in its truth-telling, the songs and music are shocking.

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In her hands, truth-telling becomes a way of handling a nearly unlivable circumstance. Along with humor, faith and technique, it is a way of overcoming, and a lesson in survival.

DETAILS

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