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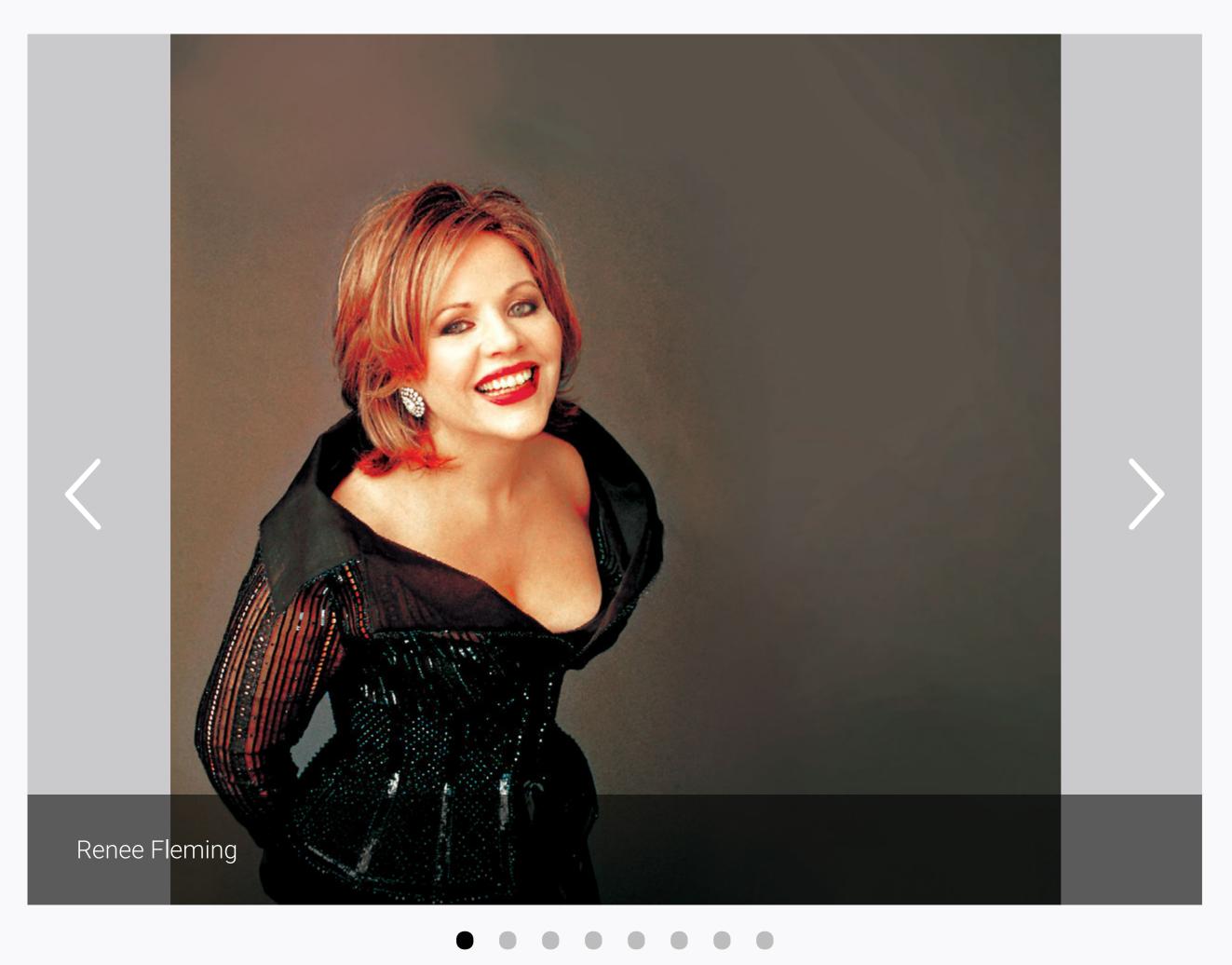
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Billy Childs' Powerful Tribute to Songwriting Icon Laura Nyro

Treasure hunt

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UPDATED APRIL 25, 2019 - DAVID R. ADLER



ake your pick of what to love about Laura Nyro: her winding harmonies, her everlasting melodies, her fantastical wordplay, her rocking, swinging way with sounds reminiscent of Broadway, soul, jazz, folk, Brill Building pop and much else. The Bronx-born pianist, singer-songwriter and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee set a blazing example in a time of great turmoil in the late '60s and early '70s. Pianist Billy Childs, thanks to his older sister, heard Nyro's message at a young age and found an obsession for life.

After sitting on the idea of a Nyro-themed album for some 15 years, Childs has released Map to the Treasure: Reimagining Laura Nyro (Sony Masterworks), which features Renée Fleming, Wayne Shorter, Dianne Reeves, Rickie Lee Jones, Ledisi, Chris Potter and other singular talents in a rousing, genre-defying homage to Nyro's genius. Reeves, who began working with Childs "at about 19 or 20," recalls that "Laura Nyro was a topic of discussion from the first time I met him."

In fact, Childs was working on Nyro's music even as a stone beginner. "Map to the Treasure' is one of the first things that I learned to play on the piano," says Childs, 57. "There's a pattern in A-minor, I just really loved it." He also marveled at Alice Coltrane's harp accompaniments on Nyro's 1970 opus Christmas and the Beads of Sweat, so it's no accident that harp is central to the sound of Childs' Jazz-Chamber Music albums, Lyric (2005) and Autumn: In Moving Pictures (2009).

"The ensemble [on Map] is essentially my Jazz-Chamber ensemble," says Childs. "There are some different instrumentalists ... but [drummer] Brian Blade and [bassist] Scott Colley have played on both my Jazz-Chamber recordings, and the string quartet is also a connection." One major difference: Larry Klein acted as sole producer of Map, and did much to bring out the drama and poetry of Nyro's songs while also foregrounding Childs' own vision. (It wasn't lost on Childs that Klein had produced Herbie Hancock's Grammy-winning River: The Joni Letters.) "I'm usually autonomous on all of my albums, but this was a true collaboration with Larry, a first for me," Childs says. "Letting go of total creative control was just amazing."

Klein met Childs in a theory class at age 16 and the two became best friends. They'd soon play together in Freddie Hubbard's raging sextet of the early '80s. "This was the first project that we came back together on, after 30 years or [so]," Childs says.

Reeves was part of the reunion as well. "Billy, Larry and I had a band very early on," she says, "and I hadn't seen Larry in years, so it was extraordinary. We did a couple of takes and the rest of the time we sat and drank coffee and talked about old times."

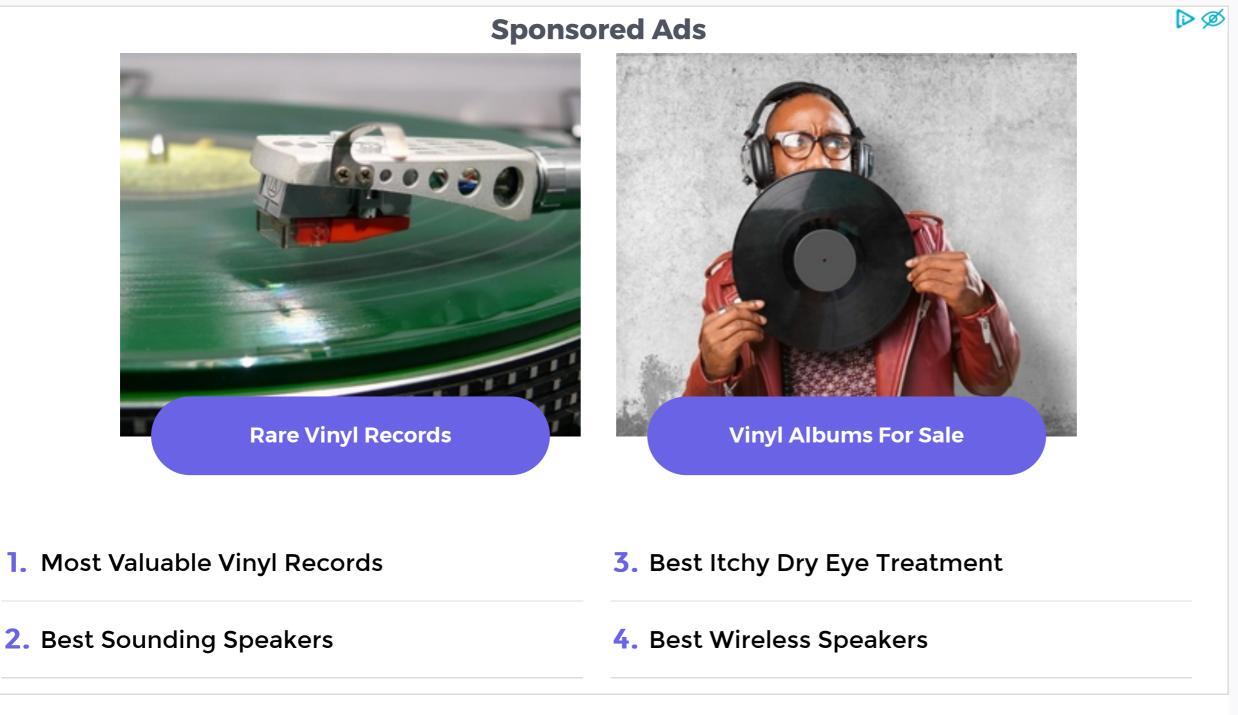
From Reeves' luminous interpretation of "To a Child" to the Esperanza Spalding/Wayne Shorter pairing on "Upstairs by a Chinese Lamp," Map to the Treasure matches singers to songs with unerring taste. Renée Fleming opens with "New York Tendaberry," her darkly hued phrases framed by Yo-Yo Ma's cello in a performance that Childs describes as "in between a jazz ballad and an art song." Susan Tedeschi and alto saxophonist Steve Wilson reach similar heights on the harrowing and beautiful "Gibsom Street."

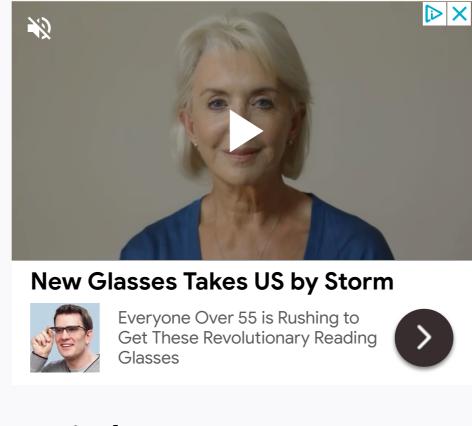
By slowing the tempo of "Save the Country," crafting ravishing string parts and enlisting Shawn Colvin with trumpeter Chris Botti, Childs arrives at another kind of emotion within the song. "We're talking about America and I wanted it to sound American," he says, "almost a military, dirge-like, valedictory type of approach on the trumpet, a symbol of spring, an American symbol. It's very triadic; the language is very Copland-esque and hymn-like. We wanted to portray it that way." The American theme resurfaces on the closing track, Alison Krauss' brisk and slightly ominous minor-key version of "And When I Die," which elicits a formidable Dobro solo from Jerry Douglas.

Lisa Fischer, featured so powerfully in the documentary film 20 Feet From Stardom, conjures a musical universe on "Map to the Treasure," perhaps the most formally and sonically ambitious song of the set. It was also Fischer who brought Becca Stevens to Childs' attention, and "The Confession," an uptempo beast of a song, proved the right choice. "Working with Billy has been such a gift," Stevens says, "and it's led to an awesome collaboration. Now whenever I go to L.A. we write music together and we're working on a duo project."

Late in "The Confession" there's a grip-your-seat moment-a startlingly intense solo eruption on Wurlitzer electric piano-that says everything about Childs' passion for his subject. "I think that keyboard solo is more the energy of Laura at the end of the song," Stevens says. "I take the back seat with Laura's singing part, it's like a shout chorus, and then Billy becomes Laura with his screaming solo."

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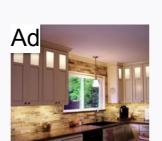
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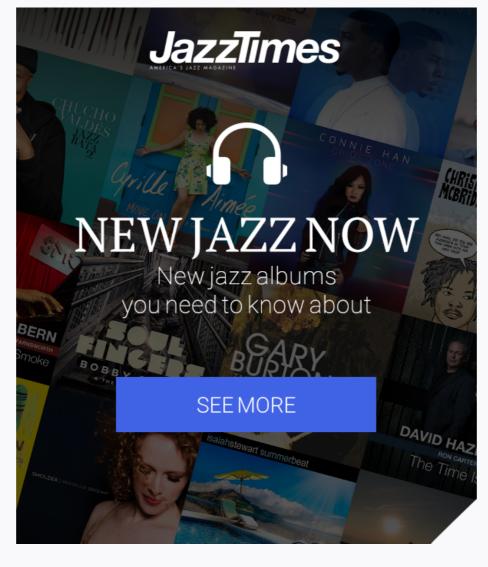
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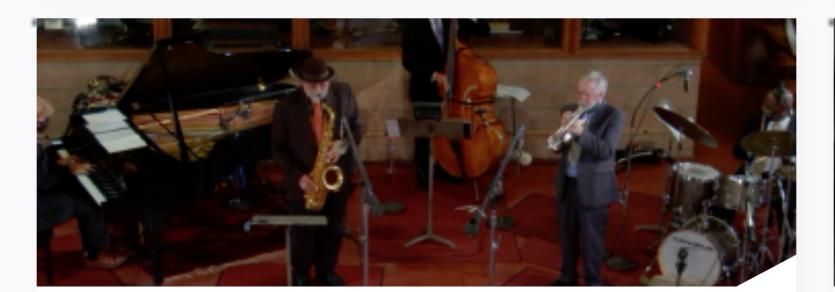
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