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### JANE MONHEIT

*The Songbook Sessions: Ella Fitzgerald*

Jane Monheit, vocals; Nicholas Payton, trumpet, arrangements; five others  
Emerald City ECR 001 (CD). 2016. Nicholas Payton, prod.; David Stoller, eng. DDD? TT: 58:48

**PERFORMANCE** ★★★★★

**SONICS** ★★★★★

There may be people out there besides me who have thought of Jane Monheit as a nice singer with a lovely voice, but a lightweight. If we weren't wrong before, we are now.

The vocalist on this record is an audacious, high-risk improvising artist. *The Songbook Sessions* is Monheit's first recording for own label, and she's made her own decisions. It's her first collaboration with Nicholas Payton as producer, arranger, and featured trumpet soloist. Ella Fitzgerald sang the definitive, default versions of these songs. Payton's charts reimagine them in contemporary harmonic terms and, in his words, "push Jane into places she might not push herself."

It is paradoxical that Monheit's most personal album is a tribute to another singer. But it is precisely the tension between Fitzgerald's remembered purity and Monheit's current edginess that makes this record compelling. In such pieces as "Somebody Loves Me," "Something's Gotta Give," and "All of You," Fitzgerald's swing was a force of nature. Monheit and Payton put kinks in these tunes, with suspenseful hesitations and sudden rushes. Monheit smears "Ev'ry Time We Say Good-bye" all across the bar lines. Her loose rephrasing sounds driven by emotion, not technical conceit. "Ill Wind" and "This Time the Dream's on Me" start as songs and become dramatic recitations. The eroticism of Monheit's "I've Got You Under My Skin" is a sensual domain Fitzgerald never gave herself permission to explore.

For fans of jazz vocal art, the best news of the year to date is that Monheit and Payton plan more *Songbook Sessions*. —Thomas Conrad



### MIKE MORENO

*Lotus*

Mike Moreno, electric & acoustic guitar; Aaron Parks, piano, Fender Rhodes; Doug Weiss, bass; Eric Harland, drums  
World Culture Audio & Video Labs 5638604712 (CD). 2015. Mike Moreno, prod.; Chris Allen, eng. DDD. TT: 49:58

**PERFORMANCE** ★★★★★

**SONICS** ★★★★★

Guitarist Mike Moreno, a formidable sideman with Kendrick Scott, Will Vinson, Logan Richardson, and many others, has brought to his work as a leader a haunting compositional sense and flair for sonic invention. One of his hallmarks is a beguiling blend of electric and acoustic guitar textures that lends his music a distinctive sparkle and intimacy.

On *Lotus* that electric/acoustic duality is more pronounced, more deftly handled than ever. The album's melodic clarity and unshakable quartet chemistry mark it a standout in an already compelling catalog. Pianist Aaron Parks and bassist Doug Weiss, both on hand from previous Moreno sessions, couldn't be more compatible with drummer Eric Harland, whose steady but flexible groove and nuanced sound palette frame Moreno's compositions in the best light. The mix is superb: softly muted snare-drum beats sound crisp and unusual; the woody, metallic acoustic guitar enhances the more liquid-sounding electric; intricate and beautiful guitar-piano unisons sing out and spiral onward.

It's notable that Moreno hasn't used a horn on record since his 2007 debut. On *Lotus* he stays with that chord-rich aesthetic, elaborating the lush harmony along with Parks but also, at times, keeping to the background. His subtle slide-guitar flourishes in "The Hills of Kykuit" are particularly inspired. So is his boundlessly expressive acoustic solo in "The Empress." Parks's shimmering Fender Rhodes in the hovering ballad "Can We Stay Forever?" harks back to the vibraphone-centric sound of *Another Way*. —David R. Adler