

Naked Music, Well Dressed

George De Stefano (September 25, 2008)



Vocalist Petra Magoni and bassist Ferruccio Spinetti make (beautiful) Musica Nuda

I had modest expectations of Musica Nuda, the Italian bass and voice duo that made their American club debut September 23 at Joe's Pub in Manhattan. I'd listened a few times to 55/21, their new CD on the legendary jazz label Blue Note, and enjoyed it. Vocalist Petra Magoni and contrabassist Ferruccio Spinetti (late of Avion Travel) boast serious jazz chops and an eclectic pop sensibility. The album's 17 selections cover canzone napoletana, contemporary Italian canzone (Lucio Battisti, Fabrizio de André, and Adriano Celentano are major influences), Brazil, American standards, and The Beatles.



Like I said, it's an enjoyable record, cleverly conceived and impeccably executed.

But it doesn't capture the excitement of the duo's live performances. At Joe's Pub, they blew me away.

I had actually doubted whether they'd be as good live as on the album. Magoni's and Spinetti's idea of "naked music"—stripping a composition down to its intimate essence—works well on a recording. The appearance on several tracks of guest musicians, including the brilliant pianist Stefano Bollani (Magoni's husband), trombonist Gianluca Petrella (from Enrico Rava's Italian band) and flautist-guitarist Nicola Stilo add tonal color and variety to what is a highly restrictive concept. I feared that in performance, the limitations of their approach would result in tedium. I couldn't have been more wrong.

Magoni is an exciting performer with phenomenal vocal skill and charisma to burn. Conservatory trained in Livorno and Milan, she also studied with the American jazz artists Bobby McFerrin and Sheila Jordan and fronted a punk rock band, Senza Freni. The thin (almost alarmingly so) and gamine-like singer called upon all her influences and experience during her and Spinetti's superb set, whether they were serving up a soulfully understated medley of "Anema e core" and "Senza Fine" or deconstructing "Nature Boy."

Actually "deconstruct" hardly describes what they did to the standard made famous by Nat King Cole. In Magoni's eccentric and electrifying rendition, the "strange, enchanted boy" has rocked her world, made her un po' pazza, and she conveyed this erotic derangement with dazzling vocal technique and uninhibited body language.

Up and coming singer-songwriter Pacifico, who played a brief set before Magoni and Spinetti, joined them for "Pazzo il Mondo," his composition that opens the new Musica Nuda album. It's a twisty number with a chorus reminiscent of Vincio Capossela's "Moskavalza," a fine vehicle for Magoni's vocal dexterity and vivacious persona.

The bespectacled Spinetti, with his unruly nest of black hair, beard, and deadpan expression, made a striking visual contrast to the animated Magoni. An excellent musician, his work was melodic, harmonically sophisticated, and rhythmically in the pocket.

Magoni and Spinetti more than earned the rapturous ovation they got from the full house at the end of their set. I was applauding and cheering as enthusiastically as everyone else, captivated by the duo's brilliance and their infectious joy in music-making.

Buy their CD 55/21 (the title comes from Neapolitan numerology, "55" signifying music, "21" a nude woman) but don't miss an opportunity to see them in concert. Naked music rarely comes so elegantly attired.

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