

Calabria Foti

A LOVELY WAY TO SPEND AN EVENING – MoCo Records 23-002. Web: www.calabriefoti.com. *Love Me As Though There Were No Tomorrow; The Touch of Your Lips; Do It Again; When Lights Are Low/Linger In My Arms; All Of You; I Am Woman (You Are Man)/You Fascinate Me So; I Wanna Be Loved; Close Your Eyes; A Lovely Way to Spend an Evening; For All We Know*

PERSONNEL: Calabria Foti, vocals, violin solos; Matt Harris, piano, electric piano; Larry Koonse, guitars; Trey Henry, bass; Dick Weller, drums; Luis Conte, percussion; Bob McChesney, trombone solos; Rob Lockhart, tenor sax solo; string section

By Curtis Davenport

The concept album has long been a part of our musical landscape, in jazz as well as in other musical idioms. However, making a *great* concept record, (one that does not lapse into triteness in an attempt to make the “concept” hold together) is not an easy task. Some fine performers have tried and missed the mark, sometimes by a mile. Having heard my share of them over the years in a number of musical idioms, I find that many of the greatest concept records have taken on one of the most universal themes, love; either lost or found. So, if you’re going to put together a concept album, romance is a great place to start. This brings us to the disc that we’re reviewing, *A Lovely Way to Spend an Evening*, by Calabria Foti. Ms. Foti, a multi-talented artist, has clearly set out to create a concept album about romance that combines the smoldering passion of “love” concept records such as Marvin Gaye’s *Let’s Get It On*, with the jazzy sophistication of Sinatra’s classic Capitol concept albums, which also dealt, in various ways, with romance.

This is Ms. Foti’s second disc; a follow-up to 2005’s *When a Woman Loves a Man*, a disc that I have not heard, but apparently follows the same concept as *A Lovely Way...* A native of upstate New York, Foti was born into a family of musicians and exposed to classical, jazz and standards from a very early age. She has been singing professionally since the age of twelve, when she joined her parents onstage at their gigs. Moving to Los Angeles early in her career, Foti has been in great demand for years on the West Coast studio scene, as a vocalist and as a world class violinist. Notably, her violin is featured in the theme of the venerable PBS show *Great Performances*, while she beautifully sings “I’m In the Mood for Love” on the soundtrack of the recent Bernie Mac/Ashton Kutcher film, *Guess Who*.

A Lovely Way to Spend an Evening announces its intentions before you even hear a single note. From the moment that you see the cover photograph of the striking Ms. Foti, giving the camera a come-hither look, as she reclines in a strapless gown and elbow length evening gloves; you realize that the concept of this disc isn’t travel, but staying put, perhaps for a long time and definitely with some company. Often, the good news will stop there, as the music inside fails to fulfill the promise of the packaging. I’m happy to report that this is not the case here, as Calabria Foti, the singer, is the real deal. She is not a burnt-out rock or soul singer overreaching her grasp, as we’ve heard too often in the glut of “songbook” releases that have flooded the market in the past couple of years. Nor is she the operatic diva “slumming,” in order to reminisce on her pre-stardom salad days of toiling in nightclubs, who now occasionally blesses the Philistines with a standards

album. No, Ms. Foti is an honest to goodness *jazz* singer, who has marvelous pipes, knows how to interpret a lyric and swings like mad, even while she is slyly trying to seduce you.

Ms. Foti is backed by a team of top flight West Coast jazzmen, including guitarist Larry Koonse, who has played extensively with Cleo Laine and Mel Torme, among others; pianist Matt Harris, a veteran of many Los Angeles studio jazz sessions and veteran trombonist Bob McChesney, who also handled production chores. The musical highlights are many, as this disc is a delight from first note to last. Personal favorites are “Do It Again,” a song most closely associated with Judy Garland and often performed at a bright tempo, which is given a burning, languorous reading by Foti that smolders with passion. When she purrs “oh, come and get it,” you know that resistance is futile. To top it off, she opens and closes the tune by showing off her violin prowess with a couple of brief solos. A medley of “I Am Woman, You Are Man” from *Funny Girl* and “You Fascinate Me So,” a Cy Coleman rarity, work together so seamlessly you’ll think that they were part of the same song. Foti’s lightly swinging vocal is memorable as is Harris’s tasty piano work. In the liner notes, Ms. Foti says about this medley “Hope you like the idea!” I’d say the answer is a resounding “yes.” Overall, the best moments were the ones where Foti worked with the quartet or quintet, minus the string section and let her jazz singer chops really flow; such as on the “I Am Woman...” medley, a boppish “Close Your Eyes” and the best moment on the album, “The Touch of Your Lips,” which has a light jam session feel. Here, Foti states the theme then takes off into a wonderfully cool scat; Koonse then shows a bit of a Tal Farlow influence in his solo and bassist Trey Henry gets to turn in one of his rare, but welcome solos. As nice as the tracks with strings are, I feel that we are really hearing the best of what Ms. Foti has to offer in the small group setting and I’d love to hear more.

In a year that has seen many obscure but gifted singers make a bid for attention in the jazz world, Calabria Foti is one of the few who stands out from the crowd. I expect that we will hear a great deal more from her in the future, as she has the looks and more importantly, the voice that the media should seek when they are out to anoint a jazz singing star. Her latest album *A Lovely Way to Spend an Evening* is a disc that you’ll spend many evenings and perhaps a few mornings and afternoons listening to. It has everything that a great concept record should have: great songs, sung by a great voice and a theme that holds together seamlessly, from start to finish.