

## TALES OF THE UNUSUAL—LINER NOTES

### Where Is Everybody?

Each one of us seeks the right amount of solitude. A social butterfly might require very little, while a writer could need an island of it. We each need an audience, too, people who appreciate what we do and support our doing it. Some need more of one and less of the other, and they get what they need, or not—it's all a part of life. Simple, right?

Of course not.

But Lorraine Feather, a lover of solitude with the soul of a collaborationist, is beginning to understand this complicated dichotomy pretty well. The interplay between one's own world and the rest of humanity is that vast chasm which is not only the source of our greatest joys, but the pit of our greatest perplexities and mysteries. The daily murk of those oddities and brilliance of the epiphanies are the port of entry for *Tales of the Unusual*.

Avoiding bright triteness and easy observations, this is a musical inquiry into that mysterious labyrinth at the distant edges of rational human behavior, a foggy moor equal parts chilling nightmare and blinding vision quest, vaudevillian adventure and paralytic terror. Each tale is a look at the incongruities, peculiarities, derangements and cruelties of life beyond the pale, that roadless, unmapped area deep in the metaphysical outback. To say the least, these aren't the usual jazzy baubles dancing lightly atop a few blue notes.

Feather's new lyrics, delivered with her crystalline alto and gymnastic diction, have graduated into strongly affecting poetry that is weighted with a sense of immediacy and weird urgency. Her early songwriting never shied from close examination of life, but with *Language* and *Ages* she began to dive under the surface, and on this album she dove profoundly deeper. Not that there's anything particularly clinical about her approach, but it would be tempting to say that the cold eye she casts, the razor-edged humor and nearly molecular detail of her lyrical descriptors are not for the faint of heart. Tempting.

But not true. Because the words comprising her linguistic vivisection rend no flesh, leave no scars. Hers is a poisonless pen, a delicately filed quill that is yet filled with the blackest of inks, pointing to the oddly fascinating beast coiled and waiting to spring to life within each of our breasts. So in "The Hole in the Map," composer Russell Ferrante's ominously threatening piano intro sets the scene for a silent-movie thriller which turns the theater of the mind into a very dark Amazon forest that is a "counterfeit paradise" lacking adequate food to sustain human life, but abundantly supporting the horrors of hanging boa constrictors, "homicidal gnats" and cyanide-squirting millipedes. And that's nothing. The truly terrible mystery in the tale is our real-life hero Percy Harrison Fawcett's overwhelming urge to go back to them again and again.

Though she is known for her adroit vocal skills, Lorraine Feather's principal instrument

is her pen. Like John Irving's novelist-hero T.S. Garp, she uses a storyteller's fictions for the way they allow her to spring from fact into "imagined truths," postulated realities informed by her personal observations and closely held viewpoints. She is not merely a reporter on the whackjob beat. The irony, of course, is that *Tales of the Unusual* musically conveys layers of meaning which are cunningly revealing mirror images of the scrutinized minutiae that make people tick irregularly, and the hands on their clocks run backwards.

Eddie Arkin's masterful composing for "Off-the-Grid Girl," for example, feels like a hybrid "St. James Infirmary," a partly 19th-century-Delta, partly 20th-century-Chicago down-and-filthy blues updated for the 21st century. Combined with Feather's disconcerting Northwest grunge-vooodoo lyrics, it is a vision even more harrowing than a lover's corpse on that infamous cold white table. I thought I'd never hear this old Preservation Hall sound again, that hopeless sense of dread and damnation in Kid Thomas' stately second-line trumpet—until now. The lovers' roles are reversed, but listen closely to these lyrics, and you'll probably wonder whatever could have drawn this Harvard preppie to the twisted singer's isolated world. Listen closer, and you'll know he was an off-the-gridding mainlander to whom there was only one thing crazier than cozying up to her malevolent beauty, and that was leaving her. So sweet, so cold, so fair.

Pianist/co-writer Shelly Berg's composing has abetted Feather's wit once again, this time helping her to find a way on "Out There" for Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, the two most serious people this side of the ozone layer, to crack smiles, at long last, and make beautiful music together, while Tony Morales' reprise on "Five" provides the trademark off-center loopiness central to Feather's world-view that makes us all laugh at the distortions looking back at us from this funhouse's mirror.

After months of lyrical collaboration with the other composers, including virtual rendezvous with old friends like Duke Ellington and strangers like Nino Rota, the tumult of commingling orchestrations brought it all to temperature, as the invited musicians' intensely exhausting, but ultimately exhilarating work clabbered the cream. Melody, harmonic density and rhythm are integrated with lyrical content so cohesively on these pieces—and the individual songs united with such thematic resonance—that it is difficult to imagine them any other way. Regular Grant Geissman's slippery, swinging guitar lines and soulful bassist Mike Valerio's endless atmospherics anchor a rhythm section, along with drummers Gregg Field and Mike Shapiro, that works with these erudite pianists to form the Swiss-watch precision necessary for Feather's vocal allegros and pirouettes. In effect, they are now an established "working band" whose seamless ingenuity here made the introduction of violinist Charlie Bisharat's brilliant work the casting coup of this album. Bisharat's insinuating lines and itchy filigrees repeatedly take the proceedings down the rabbit hole and through a glass onion... a portal leading to unheard-of ZIP codes and an isolated stretch of Oregon blacktop, where Mike Miller's power-chorded metal guitar accompanies Mulder and Scully as they spring forward and fall back through the "universal invariant."

“I Took Your Hand” is a haunting story of what can be described accurately only as love at second-sight—the singer has met a man at a posh masked ball during which neither removes a mask, yet inexplicably, they are mutually revealed “heart and soul” to each other in an electrifying paroxysm of psychic energy when she takes his hand. But because she is so overwhelmed with longing that she can’t manage to accept his invitation to dance, the story ends with the music swirling around them, and without them. Inspired by an Enrico Pieranunzi composition called “Fellini’s Waltz,” the melody is a powerful evocation of the kind of double-edged emotions that characterize the film director’s surrealistic imagery. Like driving through switchback mountain roads in Italy that seem to double back and arrive where they started, the lyrics drift from one chimerical image to the next without ever quite revealing where they are. This is some of Lorraine Feather’s finest collaborative work. The emotion and coloration in her nuanced vocal are wedded to playing so hair-raising and sensitively *concerto*, you’d think these musicians had played it every day for twenty years. Shelly Berg’s glistening, Evans-like touch, Field’s silken brushwork, Valerio’s swelling and subsiding heartbeat, all usher in Bisharat’s violin lines that weep and intertwine in counterpoint duet with Feather’s singing:

“I seemed to see you as the years flew by,  
And hoped you understood  
They could not ever dim your beauty.  
Of course it would have been insanity  
To say that to a stranger,  
As you were to me,  
No more than a stranger.”

On October 2, 1959, in his closing voiceover for the first-ever episode of *The Twilight Zone*, Rod Serling offers an oblique answer to the question “Where Is Everybody?,” posed at the beginning of the story by an astronaut being experimentally tested for manned flight to the moon, and prepared by the most terrifying thing in the world: total deprivation of human contact.

“*Up there,*” Serling says in that Lucky Strike baritone of his, “*up there in the vastness of space, in the void that is the sky, up there is an enemy known as isolation. It sits there in the stars waiting.*”

Every fully engaged artist, whether Vincent Van Gogh or Lorraine Feather, uses all the long and short moments available in life for the self-induced solitariness of creative work, the crafting of something that can reach across the vastness of space and gather every living thing (verminous creature or not) in her arms and bring them together—despite all the reasons not to.

Care to join her?

—Carl L. Hager

