

Kurt Elling *Nightmoves*

With seven Grammy nominations already to his credit, vocalist Kurt Elling has attained elite status in the jazz world before reaching the age of 40. Riding to international prominence on the strength of his critically acclaimed performances as well as a string of stellar recordings for the Blue Note label, the perennial poll-winner has become the voice of a new generation of jazz fans. He's been called "the most flamboyantly creative jazz singer to emerge in the last decade" by the *San Francisco Chronicle* and was recently named *Down Beat's* Male Vocalist of the year in both Critics and Readers polls for 2006 (the third time he's won the top spot in both polls). And though he continues to operate in his own singular orbit, the Chicago native is following in the footsteps of vocalese pioneers like Eddie Jefferson, King Pleasure, Jon Hendricks and perhaps his single biggest influence, Mark Murphy. Combining thought-provoking lyrics with clever arrangements, surprising choices of material and an infinite capacity to swing, Elling has forged a potent body of work since his 1995 debut that is marked by quality, consistency and an audacious sense of risk-taking.

On *Nightmoves*, his brilliant debut for Concord Records and seventh outing overall, Elling artfully blends his rich baritone voice with signature scattling and virtuosic vocalese in a wide-ranging repertoire of tunes associated with such greats as Frank Sinatra, Antonio Carlos Jobim, Irving Berlin, Betty Carter, Duke Ellington, Dexter Gordon and Keith Jarrett. His most ambitious undertaking to date, it features his working trio of bassist Rob Amster, drummer Willie Jones III and longtime creative partner, pianist-arranger Laurence Hobgood, along with such special guests as The Escher String Quartet, bassist Christian McBride, Yellowjackets tenor saxophonist Bob Mintzer, guitarist Guilherme Monterio, keyboardist Rob Mounsey and harmonica virtuosos Howard Levy and Gregoire Maret.

Elling and company skillfully shift the mood throughout the program from seductive bossa novas (Michael Franks' "Nightmoves" and Alan Pasqua's "And We Will Fly") to unabashed swingers (Betty Carter's "Tight"), from gorgeous ballads ("Where Are You?") to highly personal takes on Sinatra ("In The Wee Small Hour") and Ellingtonia ("I Like The Sunrise") to a stirring vocalese interpretation of the jazz classic "Body And Soul" with new lyrics written by Kurt for this session.

Considered one of the foremost contemporary voices in the art of vocalese -- the act of putting words to improvised solos of jazz artists -- Elling has set words to solos by Wayne Shorter, Keith Jarrett, Dexter Gordon and Pat Metheny; often incorporating images and references from writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Jalal al-Din Rumi, Pablo Neruda and Beat poets Jack Kerouac and Kenneth Rexroth into his work. On *Nightmoves*, Elling once again relies on literary references for a couple of tunes. "The Sleepers" is a musical setting written by pianist-arranger Fred Hersch for a Walt Whitman poem while "The Waking" is an intimate bass-voice duet set to a 1953 poem by Theodore Roethke.

Elsewhere on *Nightmoves*, Elling puts his distinctive stamp on a soulful version of The Guess Who's 1969 pop hit "Undun" while also tackling Betty Carter's "Tight" with requisite hipness. Hobgood's arrangement of "Change Partners/If You Never Come To

Me" successfully merges an American classic onto a classic bossa nova.

Another creative medley, "Leaving Again/In The Wee Small Hours," features the unlikely musical pairing of Keith Jarrett and Frank Sinatra. Says Elling, "'Leaving Again' is a Keith Jarrett improvisation that I transcribed and wrote a lyric for. It was something from the live boxed set that he did with the trio (1994's *Keith Jarrett At The Blue Note: The Complete Recordings* on ECM). With his usual ingenuity and grace Keith essentially improvised a new verse for 'Wee Small Hours.' It gave me, as a lyricist, an opportunity to tell a different story with the piece so that instead of it being a lament about having lost someone, it's more about living through the pain of knowing and having love, but not having that special someone there to share it. That's part of the jazz thing when you do a standard; you try to find a new shade of meaning or frame it in such a way that it sounds brand new. It definitely helps that I am so interested in writing."

The alluring "And We Will Fly" is a soulful interpretation of a piece by West Coast pianist Alan Pasqua, who originally recorded it on his 2005 trio release *My New Old Friend* (Cryptogramophone) with drummer Peter Erskine and bassist Derek Oles. "This particular tune just jumped out at me right away but to add a lyric presented a real challenge. I had to figure out how to maintain the delicacy of the piece while also making it clearly a singer's thing. I needed to soften my approach in the delivery in order to maintain the spirit of the original."

The seductive "Nightmoves" is a Michael Franks tune that Elling remembered from his college years. "Some of his stuff always just stuck with me because it's real hip and intelligent," he says. "He's a good writer. He keeps everything pretty simple on the melodic front but, boy; he's got some good lyrics in him."

"Where Are You" is a vocalese number written by Elling based on Dexter Gordon's recording of the piece for his 1962 Blue Note recording, *Go*. Hobgood's string arrangement here adds a lush element to this gorgeous ballad. And "The Sleepers" is a new incarnation of the Fred Hersch piece that Elling previously sang on Hersch's 2005 Palmetto recording *Leaves of Grass* and subsequently performed live as part of 10-piece chamber ensemble at Carnegie's Zankel Hall in New York City.

The twilight-through-dawn theme that permeates *Nightmoves* -- from the opening title track to the closing "I Like The Sunrise -- is a leitmotif throughout much of Elling's work. "The night really fascinates me," he says. "The things that happen in the night and the comfort that one can have being shrouded in darkness, in stillness, listening to music and pondering and considering...that has always intrigued me."

The dusk-to-dawn theme climaxes with his noble rendition of "I Like The Sunrise," an Ellington composition that has rarely been covered. "I'm not sure why it hasn't been played more because it's just pure, dignified Duke spirit," says Kurt. "The natural exuberance that he displayed throughout his life for living and for being a musician really shines through Duke's writing here."

Elling's vocalese version of this obscure Ellington piece is based on Von Freeman's

improvised melody of the song from the tenor saxophonist's 2002 recording *The Improvisor* on Premonition Records, while the lyrics are adapted from a poem by the 13th century Persian poet Jelaluddin Balkhi (also known as Rumi). "Von did a duet with pianist Jason Moran on this tune a few years ago, and it was the first time I had heard the piece. I fell in love with it right away, not only because of Duke's writing but also because Von is just preaching the *word* in that solo. And the only person whose writing I could think of that approached that level of ecstatic singing was this 13th century mystic poet named Rumi. I did some adapting of Coleman Barks' great translation of his poem 'Where Everything Is Music.' Some of the lines fit exactly with what Von was playing and some had to be moved around a bit to keep the meaning. But these really are the three rivers that sourced that piece -- 20th century Ellington, 13th century Rumi and 21st century Vonski. And it all comes together for me."

Regarding his inventive take on the jazz classic "Body and Soul," ("All My Body And Soul"), Elling says, "I had wanted to do a vocalese version of that for a decade or more but it's one of those things that I just waited on until the right inspiration and the right reason to write it came along. And when it finally came, it came like gangbusters. Basically, I'm singing a love song to my daughter, Luiza. It's something that I wrote out of respect for the original and shaded by the inspiration of having Luiza in my life. She has changed me -- for the better."

Elling has been giving his considerable vocals gifts to fans for the past 12 years, since his recording career began at age 27 with the 1995 release of *Close Your Eyes*, the first of his consecutive string of six Grammy nominated albums. In 1997, *Playboy* magazine named him "Male Jazz Vocalist of the '90s" and in 2002 *Jazz Review* (UK) raised the possibility that "Elling may be the greatest male jazz singer of all time." Kurt has been named Top Male Vocalist by the Jazz Journalists Association three times and has topped the *Down Beat* Critics Poll and the *Jazz Times* Readers Poll every year since 2000.

In 2002, Elling produced a vocal summit entitled "Four Brothers" at Chicago's Park West Theater, which featured Elling, Mark Murphy, Kevin Mahogany and Jon Hendricks. Kurt led the group on successful tours of Europe and the U.S. in 2003 and 2004. A final blowout performance in the summer of 2005 took place in Chicago's Millennium Park and featured Sheila Jordan in place of Mahogany. It was called "Three Brotha's and a Motha'." Elling was commissioned by the City of Chicago to mount a large scale multi-media presentation entitled "This Is Our Music, These Are Our People" for the city's week-long millennial celebration. He has also created provocative theater pieces for Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater.

In addition to his work as an artist, Elling served as a national trustee for the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences beginning in 1999. In May of 2003, he was elected Vice Chair of the 17,000-member organization and served two successful terms. During that time he helped create and hosted the first two annual Recording Academy Salutes to Jazz. He also oversaw the creation of the Academy's Lifetime Achievement and Trustees Awards Review Committee.