



## Dept of Good and Evil

Rachel Z

by Mark S. Tucker



Initially a tepid keyboardist along the lines of Patrice Rushen (a woman who showed great promise initially but fizzled when push came to shove through a lackluster solo career), Rachel Z was unengaging in a brief stint with Steps Ahead before moving over to a failed try at resurrecting Return To Forever under the group sobriquet of Vertu, a nice little fusion effort that also ran at Mahavishnu Orchestra. Vertu created a brief but ignored wrinkle in the late 90s fusion landscape, this time captained by RTFers Lenny White and Stanley Clark, reuniting after Clarke's disaffection with the Church of

Scientology, an exhausted allegiance which earlier caused he and confrere Chick Corea to oust all non-cultists, much to our collective repugnance and amusement.

In Vertu, though, save for the ability to keep up with a fairly hard-charging ensemble, Z's contributions weren't particularly noteworthy, most puzzlingly and perhaps embarrassingly illustrated in a strange solo in the tune Anoché. Worse, she was heavily overshadowed by Karen Briggs' violin refrains, who aced everyone but Clarke. Therefore, listeners were justified in shying away from a keyboardist about whom, in the day and for while after, too much hoo-ha was unwarrantedly issuing from the promo mill.

**However, this CD is a complete surprise, though apparently Z's been developing the style for a while.** Transitioning from the shores of progressive upheaval and twists, she's become **an astonishingly adept jazz pianist in a mostly straight-up mode**, much more fitting someone who studied under Brackeen and Beirach, here with hints of Crispell sprinkled into a predominantly Corea (late period) / Guaraldi / Brubeck forté. **From start to finish, Good and Evil is a piano lover's delight, brimming with endless variations, permutations, chases, and obliquities enticingly laid in a trio format**, Bobbie Rae setting the percussives underneath her in a DeJohnette fashion cut

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with ever-so-subtle hints of Ronald Shannon Jackson (pay attention to the persistence of lightly inflected muscularity), bassist Maeve Royce coloring the subtler atmospherics.

**The degree of maturity between this and her earlier efforts is stunning**, copping a Blue Note smokiness shot through with the voluminous shards of light found in Joe Sample's best moments with the Crusaders ('cause his later solo stuff, though it sold well at times, was pretty awful). The sophomore cut here, Milky Way, a cover of The Church's Under the Milky Way, stands as poetic testament to the galaxies of distance from her salad days. Alternatingly pensive and energetic, it enfolds a globe of thoughtful and sprightly passages, voicing much of Z's range.

Covers make up most of this set, from Sting to Delibes, though you'd hardly know it, as, in the eldest tradition, once she locks onto the heart of each composition, Z immediately sets to improv'ing like mad. The CD's title is a misnomer, too: there's precious little darkness in the dozen cuts, only that which adds a bit of delineative spice in contrast, hardly a study in evil... even maladjustedness, for that matter. This detracts not a whit from the material and, heard without reference to the artist's name, one could not be faulted in guessing that the disc issued from the great old Verve / Impulse / ECM days.

**Amid the current interest in returning to old school virtues-impeccably intelligent creativity and such - Dept. of Good and Evil goes over like gangbusters. All the reasons we took to the above-mentioned spectrum of ivory ticklers-not to mention Tyner, Jarrett, Hancock, Evans, and the rest of the holy array-is gratifyingly displayed herein as well. Each cut constitutes an individual wonderland of complexity, nuance, and soaring lyricality. Taken as a whole, the surfeit is overwhelming. It's impossible that things could go wrong from here, it simply doesn't happen, not when one has attained to such a station of expertise. From the evidence, then, Rachel Z won't be long in assuming her proper mantle as one of piano's most elegant states-women, if she hasn't already. I say she has.**