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DEPT. OF GOOD AND EVIL FEATURING RACHEL Z

Savoy Jazz

Written by Mike Joyce

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DON'T LET THE NAME of the band (and the title of its eponymous CD) fool you. Dept. of Good and Evil may sound like a departure for keyboardist Rachel Z, but it's really a compelling addition to her recent solo CDs, Goth influences notwithstanding.

Given the emphasis on ensemble textures and grooves, it makes sense that Z (nee Rachel Nicolazzo) shares the credit for this album with her trio mates -- drummer-producer Bobbie Rae and the young Annapolis-bred bassist Maeve Royce -- and session collaborators -- Erik Naslund on trumpet and Tony Levin on electric bass and Chapman Stick. But Z's "featured" billing here doesn't mean her role has diminished.

If anything, she seems more willing than ever to display the range of her piano influences, radiating from the core sounds of Herbie Hancock and McCoy Tyner. It's a tack that helps freshen a curious collection of tunes that includes Sting's "King of Pain," Death Cab for Cutie's "Soul Meets Body," Joy Division's "Love Will Tear Us Apart," Bill Withers's "Ain't No Sunshine," Joe Henderson's "Inner Urge" and Wayne Shorter's "ESP." Though the pianist views herself as the "evil one" in this new setting, serving as a dark foil to the rhythm section's often vibrant drive, **her improvisations are often so harmonically rich and multifaceted that "Dept. of Good and Intriguing" ultimately seems like a more apt billing.**

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