

Penny King Quintet *"Journey"*

Review by NY based vocalist-composer-educator, Chris McNulty

Produced by Pete Jeavons, Recorded by Lee Biddle at Crank Studios, Perth, WA, August 2013

Penny King, voice, arrangements, compositions

Pete Jeavons - bass, arrangements

Carl Mackey - tenor & soprano saxophones

Tom O'Halloran - piano, vocals

Michael Perkins - drums

Penny King is a fine musician. She brings some masterfully crafted arrangements and treatments to a number of well known standards, writes some gorgeous vocalese into several pieces and introduces us to some striking composing. Her pitch is excellent, accompanied by a crystal clear and authentic tone. Her soloing is always inventive and she nails the shifts in dynamic intensity superbly and in all the right places. Using full voice to head smoothly without any marked shift in tone. The highlights for me are her originals *"Journey,"* and *"Rest Your Head"* and Wayne Shorter's *"Footprints."*

The ensemble **Penny King** and co producer, **Pete Jeavons** have put together for this project is really outstanding. From the get go, there's a gorgeous chemistry between them. **Lee Biddle** at Crank studios also deserves an early mention for bringing some excellent micing, mixing and mastering to the proceedings. The entire recording sings with a sonic beauty that's too often missing from many recordings these days. **Carl Mackey's** tone and creative intensity are always inspiring and musical without ever overwhelming the intended treatment. He hears and listens keenly and seems to have an uncanny ability to deliver what the music needs. There's a lovely forward motion in the hook up between bassist, **Pete Jeavons** and drummer, **Michael Perkins** and pianist, **Tom O'Halloran** takes no prisoners. He's been on my watch list since I first heard him play this past May at the **Perth International Jazz Festival**. For me he was a stand out at that festival and on this outing wraps Penny's voice and melodic concepts like a soft silk scarf. When called upon to put his soloistic stamp on things he elevates the music to another level.

It's great to hear a vocal jazz album that offers the same qualities of an instrumental recording but with the addition of vocal, melody and story telling. Without a doubt this album offers it up in spades. On *"Journey"* King says the riff developed first, then the melody and finally the lyric which speaks of being pulled in many different directions while staying strong on the journey - and strong it is. The piano starts with a figure which is quickly joined by bass in octave unison, setting up King's powerful vocalese entrance. The tune cunningly moves into a latin tinged feel with the opening figure reappearing between sections. Mackey joins King in harmony on the 2nd A, leading to two tremendous solos by Jeavons and Mackey while Michael Perkins lays down a monster groove and O'Halloran turns in some gorgeous explorations in the comping department. A lovely dynamic ensemble lilt allows for the entrance of just bass and voice with King's gifted story telling creating space before the figure returns and the intensity builds to vocalese sign off and a wonderful free for all with a voice and saxophone exchange soaring over the top and ralling down to just duet harmony.

The inclusion of the James Taylor composition *"Carry Me On My Way"* brought a smile to my face. Taylor's influence on singers of all genres, not just as a singer of songs but as a conceptualist, composer and story teller should never be underestimated. Here, Penny takes all the good stuff that's so often a part of a James Taylor treatment and makes it her own. There's just enough uniqueness in the approach to make it work without detracting from this sounding and being a very fine jazz album. Penny shows us that you can sound vulnerable, innocent and natural without sounding wishy washy or too "little girlish." Too many singers I hear these days have brought this annoying affectation to their voices. It's hard to imagine that it's their own voice when you know these are grown women who've obviously lived a bit. Ms. King will have none of that. Hers is a voice that's trained just enough

so you hear all her musical nuances but at the same time also hear her character, soulfulness and her truth.

Which brings me to the next highlight "**Footprints.**" The tune starts off with piano and bass exploring minimally while Perkins alone sets the time and forward motion on cymbal. Jeavons uses some lovely harmonic devices to subtly affect a move into a more defined figure which O'Halloran plays off ever so beautifully. The entrance of King's voice playfully stretching around on the melody before gliding into the head proper with Mackey accompanying, sets the stage with conviction and authority as does her dive straight into the first solo. Dancing over a time signature that had me 2nd guessing for a minute (11/4), Penny's soloistic language is never contrived or over done. Straight to the point, she colorfully mixes the use of consonants and vowels originally and uniquely, while her melody making is always at the forefront, as is her vocal intensity and tone. She soars to a lovely conclusion handing off smoothly to Mackey whose tone is glorious on this track as he crafts and builds a solo that matches King's in dynamic. The whole band gels grandly on this track with Jeavons driving the engine underneath some exceptionally creative explorations by O'Halloran. The head out has a lovely dynamic transition. The sonic beauty and balance of instruments on this album is captured masterfully on this track.

"**Rest your head**" is a beautiful prayer like piece clearly written for Penny's daughter. The quality of the piano and voice together is another highlight for me. The piano starts with O'Halloran playing a very simple, repeat melody which sets up the entrance of the voice. Here Penny uses just enough vibrato to give the story telling the right amount of emotional fervency. The piano moves to a slow ostinato like figure accompanied by bowed bass and builds in intensity as the lyric explores the journey that a mother sees for her little girl. There's a gorgeous shift in harmony and feel as Perkins enters the proceedings, hinting at a more open, understated, straight 8th feel. Some lovely coloristic underpinnings by Perkins leads to the delicate entrance of O'Halloran's perfectly rendered solo which captures King's story and intention marvelously. His solo moves trance-like to the lovely re-entry of the bridge by the full ensemble. King uses the shift in harmony and feel to powerful affect on this track and the story telling is breathtaking. "**Just You**" is a joyful romp that lifts things up a notch with O'Halloran bringing a kind of 12/8 blues tinged feel to the proceedings (ala Richard T). King tells me that she let Jeavons loose on this arrangement. The sax lines and the rhythmic figures are all Jeavons' creations. "**Together**" is a nice shift into 3/4 time, telling the story of early romance, togetherness and foreverness. King gets much looser on the phrasing here and shows her versatility - swinging in 3 and phrasing comfortably across the bars. She covers a wide range of styles but the album maintains a consistent thread - beautifully rendered treatments, deep harmony and an open, improvisational quality that will speak to the discerning ears of any serious jazz fan. "**Guide me Home**" starts with a lovely acapella vocal riff and the introduction of Mackey on soprano duties, often accompanying King in unison. Another fine feature for all the players with O'Halloran tearing it up and taking it where he pleases. The tune finishes with a different acapella vocal figure over a calypso type feel and vamp out.

A great choice and ideal closer is "**Sonnymoon for Two**" starting with a wonderful solo from Jeavons, leading to a fun vocalese break and solo from King who makes full use of her wonderful three octave range. Mackey takes hold of the groove and fittingly hands things back to King for the final statement.

Ms. King has produced a very fine piece of work here which she should feel enormously proud of. That it's her first album is astonishing. I hope she will find the support to do many more. King gives credit to her phenomenal musicians who she says took the shells of her tunes and weaved such magic with them and to **Pete Jeavons**, the musician who brought his studio and recording expertise and incredible ears to the table to assist her in realizing her heart felt and impeccably musical vision.