

Chris McNulty

DANCE DELICIOSO—Elefant Dreams. 514

West 114th St., #44 New York NY 10025. Web: www.chrismcnulty.com. *Primitive, New Day, He Moves through the Fair, All of You, Meaning of the Blues, Dance Delicioso, Last Farewell, Roamin', Star Eyes, Only the Silence, Last Farewell (Reprise).*

PERSONNEL: Chris McNulty, vocals; Gary Bartz, Gary Thomas, Dave Pietro, saxophones; Paul Bollenback, guitar; Mulgrew Miller, John DiMartino, David Budway, piano; Sonny Barbato, accordion; Eric Friedlander, cello; Ugonna Okegwo, bass; Billy Hart, drums; Café da Silva, percussion; LaTanya Hall, Darryl Tookes, Keith Fluitt, Roz Morehead, background vocals.

By Bill Donaldson



Chris McNulty is one of the current generation of jazz singers most deserving of a wider audience and greater recognition. Ever since she arrived in New York City from her native country of Australia upon receiving an International Study Grant in 1985, she has slowly but surely become involved in vocal projects that have garnered the praise not only of the listeners exposed to her music, but also of the musicians who work with her. And those musicians are some of the top jazz talent available with groups and recordings of their own—names like Gary Bartz, Mulgrew Miller, Peter Leitch, George Mraz, Joe Locke and Jeff "Tain" Watts. Of late, McNulty has teamed up with guitarist Paul Bollenback to produce her albums, including *Dance Delicioso*.

While one might expect Bollenback's guitar to be a powerful presence on the album, such is not the case. Indeed, on some of the tracks, like "All of You," McNulty is backed by a traditional piano trio (with Miller, Ugonna Okegwo and Billy Hart, plus Bartz on alto sax), as she personalizes the song with, first her subdued interpretation of anticipated beats, contrasts of dynamics and extension of the "oo's" before she and the quartet break into a solid swing. The same thing happens on "Star Eyes," with the substitution of David Budway for Miller on piano, the introduction as original and unexpected as the one for "All of You."

But Bollenback does contribute mightily to some of the tracks, even as he's a behind-the-scenes presence on the others. With leisurely accompaniment on McNulty's composition, "Last Farewell," Bollenback colors the song with gorgeous nylon string guitar as initially he suggests the rhythm while making clear the modulations. And on one of the album's most unconventional, but most revealing, songs, "He Moved through the Fair," Bollenback joins with Eric Friedlander on cello and Dave Pietro on soprano sax to create a haunting atmosphere for McNulty's exploration of its emotional depth. Moreover, her treatment of that traditional Irish folk song updated by Sinead O'Connor, as well as the ending of Annie Lennox's "Primitive," suggest not only her familiarity with, but also her affinity for, raga's modal structure as she explores the quarter tones and introduces subtle vocal embellishments American jazz singers don't usually adopt.

In addition, McNulty molds some of the songs of her choice, as well as a few of her own songs, to Brazilian sensibilities. Bobby Troup's "The Meaning of the Blues," unfurls as a swaying samba, enhanced by Sonny Barbato's poignant accordion solo, to allow McNulty to explain the blues' meaning with clarity and a sense of underlying melancholy, ironically Gallic in its regret and conflicting meanings ("Blue was just the color of his eyes/Til he said good-bye"), despite its Latin feel. The title track contains similar percussiveness, particularly from Café de Silva's interaction with Billy Hart, as McNulty

sings of the fears of young and old, the freedom of dance freeing them from their anxieties. With a quartet of back-up vocalists and a complement of instrumentalists fulfilling McNulty's and Bollenback's vision for the song, "Dance Delicioso" is one of the most complex, and still most rewarding, tracks as theme and execution support one another.

McNulty ends the CD with a duo reprise of her composition "Last Farewell," accompanied by Miller. As the entire performance on *Dance*



Delicioso fades at the words "So you go, when you go," it becomes evident that McNulty is a singer who earns the respect of other New York artists who share her commitment to the music as they accompany, interact, solo and improvise on an album worth investigating for its refreshing originality.