

The

Storyteller's

Art

SOME MUSIC IS BUILT SYMMETRICALLY, OF CONCRETE BLOCKS AND IRON GIRDERS, WITH ORNATE FRILLS ON THE SURFACE AND BRIMMING OVER WITH CONFIDENCE. OTHER MUSIC IS MADE OF A MUCH MORE RUBBERY SUBSTANCE, SUBJECT TO CHANGE AND LIABLE TO TAKE ON NEW SHAPES AT ANY MOMENT. FILE ROBIN HOLCOMB IN THE "OTHER" CATEGORY. WITH THE RELEASE OF HER FIRST ALBUM AS A VOCALIST ON NONESUCH, HOLCOMB'S BEGUILING MUSICAL MINIATURES ARE STARTING TO MAKE THEIR WAY INTO THE WORLD BEYOND NEW MUSIC. ►





GREG ALLEN

ROBIN HOLCOMB'S EXOTIC FOLK TALES

• BY JOSEF WOODARD

Holcomb is a composer-keyboardist whose pan-stylistic compositions have been featured on *Todos Santos* — her own music played by her keyboardist-husband Wayne Horvitz, with Butch Morris, Bill Frisell, Doug Weiselman, and Bobby Previte — and *Larks, They Crazy* (both on Sound Aspects). The latter album, recorded with a sextet, features Holcomb's piano playing — veering from echoes of Cecil Taylor on an angry day to Erik Satie on a pensive day. Far from being forbidding exercises in experimentalism, these albums wax exotic, with music at once introspective and crafty, abstract and melodically infectious.

At last fusing her musical and poetic instincts, Holcomb has only recently shifted from instrumental work to the more widely acceptable role of the singer-songwriter. *Robin Holcomb* is not just another entry in the growing ranks of female recording artists with new ideas and new stylistic recipes to share. Holcomb's haunting tunes have been inventively rendered and textured by Horvitz. Her songs themselves are marked by harmonic and structural twists; they sound like anthems in dreamtime, or folk songs from a half-remembered past.

Holcomb doesn't seem to especially enjoy

write songs that I knew other people were going to sing. The *Angels At The Four Corners* piece (a song cycle) was kind of frightening at first, but it turned out to be a lot of fun."

Angels At The Four Corners, a work-in-progress staged as part of the 1989 New Music America festival in New York, was an earlier indication of Holcomb's plunge into the song realm. Several of the songs on her new album were lifted from that larger opus. Strains of Leonard Cohen, Kurt Weill, and Joni Mitchell — she of such offbeat moments as "Paprika Plains" — arose from the surface of the piece. But generally, Holcomb is a bird with her own feathers, a composer of uncommon song who is forging a new language at the borders of folk — and folklore — theater music, and jazz.

Instrumentally, Holcomb was in good company. Horvitz added coloristic effects on organ (the real thing), with synth touches — sounding, at one point, like a bowed saw. Reeds players Marty Ehrlich and Doug Weiselman did the right things with their parts and solos. Bassist-tubaist Dave Hofstra and drummer Danny Frankel laid down an aptly restrained rhythm section, and guitarist Jody Harris sprinkled some anxious electric guitar lines onto the whole.

Less a contiguous operatic work than a

She laughs. "I get questions about my songs: 'What is a needle full of miracles? What is this or that?' I throw questions back: 'Well, what do you think?' I've gotten some pretty good responses."

Many of Holcomb's songs are cinematic in an enigmatic way, suggesting narrative scenarios for unmade films. "So Straight And Slow," for instance, evokes a trip down a seemingly endless, almost hallucinatory stretch of road.

"That's what it's about — running out of gas once in the midwest. That's what sparked the rest of the song, and it went other places from there. When we were talking about which song to do a video of, that song seemed like one of the more visual songs for me. I can see this whole picture when I hear it.

"We wound up doing a video of 'Nine Lives,' which is being pushed as a single. It's in black and white and is directed by Matt Mahurin. He just walked about Paris and L.A. with a camera and cut up all this footage. It's all seemed very appropriate. My participation was very minimal: I just sat on a stool and sang the song a few times. It was a very easy introduction to the video business," she laughs.

Into the odd piece titled "this poem is in memory of," snatches of "Blue Monk" creep evocatively into a mix of woozy cabaret jazz — brushes on the drums, meandering clarinet, and Horvitz' organ swagger — and narrated text. By the end, four bars of the tune are played by a mini-horn section, and they all fade into the digital reverb sunset.

"That's from an old poem," she says of the tune. "I wanted to write a tribute to Monk and also to Charles Mingus at the same time. It's kind of confused, but the lyrics refer to both of them. Then we just jammed. That's actually a track that came from the original demo tape that we ended up using."

On *Robin Holcomb*, daughter Nica has her debut, lending fitting storytelling chacter to "Hand Me Down All Stories." This listener's interpretation: the song is a reflection on the intergenerational continuum of tales handed down over years and through lives. "She really wanted to do something on it," Holcomb explains about the mother-daughter collaboration. "She had stage fright when she actually got up there, but it was just the right length. We didn't have to edit it at all. She got the headphones on and was in the booth. She wasn't used to hearing it so loud."

As a band member and arranger, Wayne Horvitz seems to have an uncanny empathy with his spouse's musical direction. New York City was the town where their ideas — individually and collectively — crystallized. As of two years ago, though, Horvitz and Holcomb (and their daughter) have been Seattle-ites. "For city living, I like it a lot," Holcomb effuses about the new boomtown. "I like the water. It's a good city for children."

For the past several years, the Holcomb-Horvitz family has had a cat-and-mouse relationship with guitarist, friend, and frequent collaborator Bill Frisell. "He got us to Hoboken from the East Village and we

"This record reflects things I have done, like the time I spent sharecropping."

the star-making machinery or entertaining analytical ideas about her music, preferring the let-music-speak-for-itself school of thought. She has been pleasantly surprised by the generous reaction to her new album. "A response that I've heard several times is that some people tend to put the record on over and over again, and they're not sure why. That makes me feel good."

When and how did the singer within her awaken? "It's relatively new for me," she says. "I've just been doing it for a couple of years now. It's something that I've wanted to do for a long time now, and my efforts were just really pathetic. They never really made sense. I wrote a lot of poetry at one point in time, and then I started writing music. I could never get them together. I'm not sure if it was just trying over and over again that made the break happen or not.

"I worked on a production of *The Tempest* once, eight years ago now. Setting Shakespeare to music was sort of liberating in a way. It was very hard to get the singers to sing the melodies I came up with. I'm not quite sure why. They were oddball melodies that fit my voice, but not anybody else's. That gave me a clue that there was something personal going on here. I was intrigued by that.

"Finally, it started to work out a little bit better. It was really interesting for me to

loosely threaded song cycle at this stage, the music itself told the most compelling story. In the tale of poor folks in North Carolina, the vocal protagonists included Holcomb herself, perched behind a grand piano, the magnetic Syd Straw as the heroine Dosia Morning Sexton, Peter Blegvad as Dosia's stoic father, and Jearly Steele-Battle as the Angel, whose fervid evocations between soul and gospel struck an obvious, mighty chord in the audience and on the stage.

With her unpretentious Art Folk sensibility, Holcomb has an uncanny knack for bittersweet turns-of-phrase, lyrically and musically. Her music swerves through several genres without ever quite touching down in a specific one. Her "Donna Song," originally heard instrumentally on the first album by the President (first on a Dossier import, then released on Nonesuch), Wayne Horvitz' instrumental ensemble, is a supremely haunting ballad, sung here in a dry plain-song style by Blegvad. It's a loopily lyrical number with deceptive hints of traditional song form, but a sensuous logic all its own.

Who is Donna? Is there a hidden story in the title? "There's no particular person. There's a line in the lyrics about someone named Donna. I'll have to make a story up."



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lived in the same building, then we got them out here to Seattle from Hoboken." At present, Horvitz, Holcomb, and Frisell seem to be at the epicenter of their own Northwestern creative outpost, recording albums in Seattle and basing operations there.

Holcomb herself has been all around this land. Born in Savannah, Georgia, the daughter of a trombone-wielding Air Force man, Holcomb spent formative years in California. After sharecropping in North Carolina, she wound up studying Javanese music at UC Santa Cruz. It was there that she met Horvitz, a kindred eclectic soul.

Along with California friends, they moved to NYC and formed an experimental band called White Noise. In the late '70s, New Music was beginning to find the sum of its

parts, and the "downtown scene" was getting underway. Their makeshift performance space, Studio Henry, as Holcomb remembers, was a "basement which became somewhat of a convergence point for a lot of other musicians. There were a lot of concerts; it was like an earlier version of the Knitting Factory."

Her musical filter has allowed various musics in over the course of her life, which makes for a diverse chemistry at present. "When I was a kid, I grew up listening to a lot of show music, for some reason. My father, for a while, had a big band that rehearsed in our house. It was a jazz band. He still plays trombone, although not very often.

"In high school and college, I listened to mostly people like the Band, Bob Dylan, Randy Newman, and people like that. I was a huge Band fanatic. And I also listened to

some old-timey music and American folk music. In college, I started listening to music from all over the world and got very involved in the Art Ensemble, Albert Ayler, and musicians like that — more new jazz stuff. I started playing that, too.

"So I don't keep up with pop music real well but, every once in a while, I'll find something that I'll latch onto. I tend to listen to the records I've listened to for years, for the most part, and then I keep up with people that I know, for the most part. That pretty much fills up my time," she laughs.

Holcomb has a natural resistance to attempts to reduce her music to the sum of her biography's parts. For instance, the natural tendency to overemphasize the "downtown" connection in Holcomb's resume — to peg her as a product of the

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NYC cauldron — is the cause of some consternation. “People have tried to link this record I made with my recent involvement in music in downtown New York. I guess there is a relationship there but, like all the things that have come before, some of that surfaces in my current projects and a lot of it doesn’t. This record does reflect certain things that I have done, like the time I spent in North Carolina sharecropping.”

Over the years, Holcomb and Horvitz have alternated between periods of close musical collaboration and of intentionally keeping distance between their separate endeavors. For the past few years, though, the couple have worked on numerous projects, including the latest album. “Besides having tremendous admiration for Wayne as a composer,” she says, “he’s really skilled. He has a lot of skills in that realm that I don’t have at all. That’s just fine with me. I’d rather be thinking about other things.”

While Horvitz wielded the producer’s paintbrush for Holcomb’s album, the job of detailing her raw material was a joint effort. “We both worked on it,” she says. “Some of them we hashed out in the studio. Some of them came to life after we started recording them. For instance, with the song ‘Hand Me Down All Stories,’ we had a version of it. It’s the newest song on the record. We had what we thought was maybe a finished version of it and it never seemed quite right. That’s when Lenny Kaye came in on the project. He came and produced a basic drum track. That song came to life after that. We had a basic form to it, but the whole mood and intention of it changed as we built it.”

Holcomb’s affection for the Band comes into play on the song “Troy,” a funky little number which clunks and sputters in the syncopated vein of “Cripple Creek.” But it wasn’t always thus: in the production stage, the song changed rhythmic direction in midstream. “I remember the day they put the horn parts on there. Wayne said he wanted to try this New Orleans kind of a thing. We’d been working in a different direction. I wasn’t in the studio that day, and I was shocked when I heard it. It was really different. We kept building on it from there. It was more of a fiddle tune for a while and then it became... clackety is a good description.”

Musically, Holcomb’s songs feature both simple hypnotic hooks and serpentine melodic lines. Lyrically, Holcomb’s songs proceed mysteriously, juggling concrete descriptive details and cryptic commentary. Needless to say, love songs are not her bent.

On that subject, she is philosophical. “I seem to shy away from directly confessional songs and also obvious love songs. I don’t think I’ll get much closer to that. There are songs on this album which refer to it. There are songs that are hopeful and also very dark on this record; I like the two things being there together. That has a little bit to

do with my view of what’s going on in life, to say the least.

“It always intrigues me to hear the different interpretations people have. For me, this song ‘Electrical Storm’ is about what it says, a lightning storm. Some woman thought it was about a grisly murder,” she laughs. “Songs that can give you room to do that appeal to me. That’s something we intended to do here. It’s not like we had an agenda, but that’s something that I like and it appeals to Wayne, too.”

Despite her relatively steady output of music, Holcomb reports that her writing habits are erratic. “I generally get a lot done in a very short amount of time after a long period of getting nervous about it. It depends on what’s going on. Sometimes, I’m able to write a lot in a relaxed manner. Sometimes I’ll wait and let other things take up my time. It’s good when I have several projects going at once. I somehow manage to get them more than when I only have one.”

This winter, she finished a commission to write a piece for the Rova Saxophone Quartet. For extra listening, you can also hear a psychedelic reading of Bob Dylan’s “Going, Going, Gone” by the same Holcomb-Horvitz-Frisell core ensemble on *Rubaiyat*, the tribute album to Elektra’s 40th anniversary. Another ongoing project for Holcomb and Horvitz is the New York Composers Orchestra, which recently released its debut album on the New World label. “We commission and perform pieces for it — new music pieces for jazz band. We’re lining up composers for the second album. Anthony Braxton wants to write something. Lenny Pickett wrote something for us, Elliott Sharp wrote a piece.”

Despite her slow, steady entry into the singer-songwriter ranks, Holcomb hasn’t forsaken her inclinations towards more abstract and conceptual settings. She hopes to find ways to marry the instrumental and vocal aspects of her music. With songs, Holcomb has backed into the mindset of a general audience that has eluded her before. “I think songs are really a powerful way of communicating, for people talking and relating to each other. I hope to be writing and performing songs for a long time to come, and encouraging other people to do that.

“Some of my lyrics have twists in them, but they’re not that weird. There’s something — if you’ll excuse the word — universal about them. I like that. People seem to be able to understand the basic idea of what all the songs are about, which is good. I think simply the fact that there are lyrics and melodies with repeating sections invites a certain amount of people who will listen more closely than they would to something that’s more abstract and open-ended, for example.

“My grandmother can kind of get into this record. Some of it troubles her, but, at the same time, she can get into it more than you’d expect.”

Holcomb pauses, then snickers. “It seems to be pretty popular with the three-to-five-year-olds we know.” ●