



Thana Alexa's "Ode to Heroes"

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Thana Alexa
"Ode to Heroes"
Jazz Village JV579002

Thana Alexa - Voice
Lenart Krečič - Tenor Sax
Sergio Salvatore - Piano
Jorge Roeder - Bass
Antonio Sanchez - Drums

I first heard Thana Alexa through the albums of Gene Ess and was immediately taken with the way she used her voice as an instrument and not solely as a means of transmitting lyrics. She is indeed a musician but this album, her debut as a leader, shows her brilliant skills as composer and

arranger. Her original tunes are crafted so well and her arrangements so imaginative that it is difficult to imagine that this is not her fourth or fifth album.

From the opening track, "Ode to Heroes," Thana shows that she is indeed an instrumentalist with her voice. Now percussive, now lush and lyrical, now precise and distinct, she employs a wide range of vocal techniques and make them all work beyond belief.

On this track alone she is joined by Donny McCaslin on tenor sax. His solos are splendid but he begins the track in percussive punctuation alongside Thana's vocals. Antonio Sanchez is a perfect fit on drums. Inventive and exciting, Sanchez moves from quick strikes to broad strokes in fascinating displays.

Sergio Salvatore on piano is a steady anchor throughout the piece and Jorge Roeder on bass rolls in tight with Salvatore.

The piece "Ode to Heroes" is an original composition. It is written so well and was imagined with Sanchez and McCaslin playing their unique styles hand in hand. The vocals are indeed the leading element of the piece and the lyrics themselves speak of inspiration and following a hero's lead.

Still, it is the sound of the vocals—even more than the meaning of the lyrics—that carry the emotion of the piece. The sound and cadence of the words carry the weight of the lyrics. An altogether extraordinary composition.

"Trace Back Your Footprints" is a Wayne Shorter composition that Thana wrote lyrics for and arranged. Lenart Krečič takes over on tenor sax for the remainder of the album. Christos Rafalides solos on vibraphone and works incredibly well with Salvatore.

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The rhythm section (including Thana's vocals) is intoxicating. Salvatore captivates and the male chorus is a terrific surprise. Hearing Thana's treatment of the Wayne Shorter number is a rich treat.

"Ghost Hawk" is also an original by Thana. It is a wonderful composition in both music and lyrics. Salvatore's piano lines are warm and touching. Sanchez draws attention to his drumming choices and Roeder's bass is sweet, line after line.

But Thana's voice...Good Lord. She is enchanting. The lullaby in the last stanza is wonderful. Touching, heart-rending with a loving and lovely melancholy. It serves as a great transition into "Groove Tune."

"Groove Tune" is a spot-on title and another Alexa original. It is a cool break moving from lyricism to hard groove and starts with the straight-up 4/4 groove. Salvatore, Roeder and Sanchez enhance that groove at every possible turn. Krečić's tenor sax takes off on some cool moments of his own and with Thana's vocals. Sanchez again gets great swing and the vocals with men's chorus is a whole other groove.

"Siena"—another original—sounds like a piece that Sarah Vaughn would have recorded. It was *nominated for Croatia's 2011 PORIN Award for "Best Jazz Composition."* It is romantic and it is emotional. Salvatore's piano is warm and touching. Those lyrics are rich and sweet. "Took your chances/No defenses/Found the love/That feels like home." Who couldn't love a line like that? Beautiful.

As young as Alexa is, she has the daring and maturity of someone 30 years older.

"In a Mode" is one of those pieces that can be called an instrumental, even though there are vocals on it. The vocals don't need the lyrics, however, because the melody carries the day. It is a cool foray into modalism (thus, obviously, the title) and it pays off.

Krečić's tenor sax is blistering and, at some points, raw. Sanchez' sweeping cymbals are astounding.

"When Evening Comes" begins almost as a call to prayer. The lyrics themselves reinforce that impression. "When the Sun goes down and evening comes to you, think about the day that's past. Could you have done anything different? What will change tomorrow?"

Scott Colley gets the bass solo and shows exquisite tone and phrasing. He is following by Salvatore's fitting piano and then by Thana's repeated stanza, accompanied by Krečić's sax. This one was a favorite.

"The Wanderer" is Alexa's vocal rendition of Charles Mingus' "Goodbye, Pork Pie Hat." It was Mingus' farewell to Lester Young who had died two months before. The song appeared on Mingus' great album, "Mingus Ah Um."

Jorge Roeder covers the John Handy bass solo and works a thing of great beauty. He is steady and soulful, just like Alexa's vocals. The song itself is vocals and bass. Seems simple enough but the dynamics of the piece are anything but simple. It is elegant and profound.

"Take Five" is, of course, written by Paul Desmond with lyrics by Dave and Iola Brubeck. This arrangement, however, is all Thana Alexa. Krečić gets to take on Desmond's sax role but Sanchez brings his own style that turns the piece upside down. Add Salvatore's left hand on piano to Roeder's bass lines and this piece takes a deep dive into the bass clef. This is as exciting as it always has been.

"M's Lullaby" must be a reference to her mother, Mercy. This is Alexa's vocals with solo piano accompaniment. The sweetness of the lullaby is as much from the words as from the light and lovely melody. "No matter how bad you think that you appear, Never feel lonely 'cause I'll always be right there." This forms the bridge to the last song on the album, entitled "You Are Not Alone."

"You Are Not Alone" is the continuation of "M's Lullaby" but with the full group joining in. The layered vocals are powerful and meaningful.

The piano, bass and drums are tight and impressive. These three fit so well together and are the ideal support for Alexa's unique vocals. Then again, every artist on this album contributes their all to this recording.

"Ode to Heroes" is Thana Alexa's stunning debut as a leader and is worthy of great attention and acclaim. Her voice is enthralling, her compositions are heart-warming and her arrangements are heart-stopping. She has a beautiful delivery not heard since the glory days of Basia Trzetrzelewska. It is no wonder that she is in such demand as guest vocalist. She brings out the best in the music, the musicians and, certainly, in herself.

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