

Jacqueline Humbert, Smoothest Chanteuse on the West Coast

O FICTION, MY LOVE

BY KYLE GANN



ABSTRACT, YET TOUCHING NONETHELESS

I've got a crush on someone, but it can never work out. She's fictional. It's Linda, the abandoned heroine of Robert Ashley's opera *Improvement: Don Leaves Linda*. Linda is imperturbable in crisis, endlessly vulnerable and endlessly unafraid, distrustful of no one, bodhisattva and ingenue rolled into one. Her sighs curve gracefully, her every spoken sentence is a melody devoid of sharp edges. A male projection, doubtless, but hardly a stereotype. Unfortunately, I feel that for two people to be happy together, they should at least share the same ontological status.

However, there is singer-performance artist Jacqueline Humbert, who does exist, and who "created" the role of Linda, to use opera-world parlance—or in more Downtown terms, around whom Ashley wrote the character. She had a career in the late 1970s as J. Jasmine, singing provocative lyrics over aggressive piano and boppy electronics provided by her husband/collaborator David Rosenboom, who himself has become one of the leading lights of interactive computer composition. Then, apparently, Humbert took a couple of decades off to work and raise children, and we were mainly exposed to her—at least here in New York—through her roles in Ashley's inimitable operas. Now she's ready for a comeback on her own, and appeared at Lotus Music and Dance July 19 for a program of her own music and works written for her.

Whatever personal qualities Humbert may share with Linda I have no idea, but their vocal characteristics are identical. Within new music, Humbert, living in California, is the opposite of our abrupt New York divas: Shelley Hersh, Lenore Von Stein, Diamanda Galas. Humbert sings with as much counterintuitive originality, but every note is rounded off, every transition smoothed, every hand motion elegantly calculated, every emotion tapered off, every word entering the ear with the feel of velvet. So many California musicians have moved to New York and vice versa, you think these geographic stereotypes have ceased to apply, and then one hits you in the face.

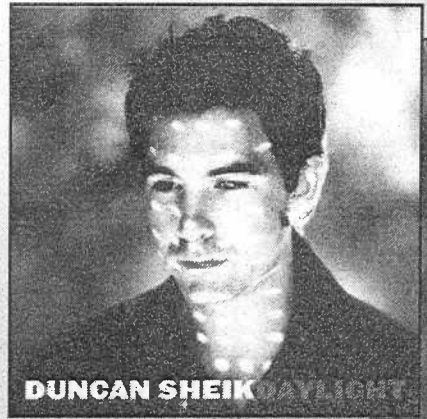
The smoothness even applies from one piece to the next. Humbert put together a program of works by herself, Ashley, James Tenney, Larry Polansky, Joan LaBarbara, Alvin Lucier, and others, and modulated so

gently from one to another that you easily lost track of which composer was which. She performed throughout with only electronic accompaniment. A few of the songs relied on recorded noises, like crickets, roaring truck engines, and rainstorms, but more had conventionally tonal music played in sophisticatedly synthesized timbres. And several composers from whom we're used to abstract noise exercises unexpectedly came across with dark emotions and bold political statements. Like Tenney, in a Kurt Weill-ish apocalyptic pop song written for Humbert after John Lennon was shot: Listen, little man, time is running out.

The earth is growing weary of you and me. . . . No more Jesus, no more Buddha, no more Marx, Mohammed, Mao, 'cause it's you and I that have to do it now. Pop and c&w styles made frequent irony-laced appearances in this electronic context, including in "Don't Get Your Hopes Up" from Ashley's recent opera *Dust*, a song about suburban infidelity almost cheap in its heartbreaking homespun beauty. Humbert sounded a little like Ashley (and therefore Linda) in her own *Profile*, in which she answered questions in a psychological survey given by a recorded voice, though with an impatient edge that Linda would never have fallen into. ("Do you have trouble falling asleep?" "Sleep is vastly overrated I think.") More abstractly, she spoke into a bottle, for resonance, a lullaby by sonic conceptualist Lucier, giving directions for what kind of sounds to make around a baby: "Gently blow white noise around the child's head at pitches and speeds and in directions and shapes that suggest the motions of wind, water, birds, fish, plants. . . ." Abstract, yet touching nonetheless.

It's mesmerizing how much personality Humbert has developed since her J. Jasmine days, every gesture so seductive, every turn of phrase so distinctive, the personality always coming through among the most disparate pieces. Some of these would have done well with live accompaniment, others allowed her to do things with her voice—overdubbing it, delaying it, and allowing her to create the impression of a vocal trio—that she couldn't have done without Rosenboom's electronics. But every line glowed with that Humbert aura, and if it didn't all sound like Linda, it sure reminded me of her from time to time. **V**

SEE DUNCAN SHEIK



DUNCAN SHEIK DAYLIGHT

DUNCAN SHEIK
DAYLIGHT
\$11.99 CD

Available August 27th

Duncan Sheik will be performing at J&R Music World Summer Concert Series at City Hall Park on August 27th. After the performance, he will be signing autographs of his new CD "Daylight" on Sale @ J&R Music World.



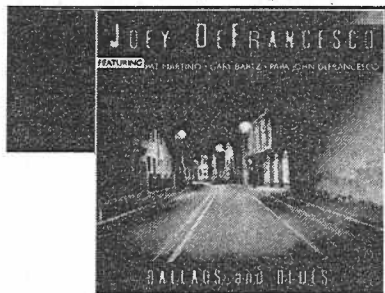
23 PARK ROW NYC, Lower Manhattan
(212) 238-9000 ACROSS FROM CITY HALL
Wed & Thurs: 9:00am-8:00pm, Fri & Sat: 9:00am-7:00pm, Sun: 10:00am-6:00pm



See Robben Ford at The Bitter End August 27th IMAC on 10th Street

Robben Ford

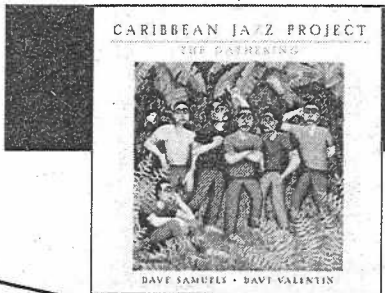
ON SALE \$12.99



See Joey DeFrancesco at Birdland August 27th

Joey DeFrancesco

ON SALE \$12.99



See Caribbean Jazz Project at The Bitter End August 27th

Caribbean Jazz Project

ON SALE \$12.99

Rockefeller Center, 51st & 6th Ave.
Midtown, 716 Lexington Ave.
The Village, 405-407 Sixth Ave.

"And 38 other Metro NY and New Jersey locations"
Log on to www.fye.com for the location near you.

CHARGE IT! HURRY, SALE ENDS AUGUST 27th
© 2002 F.Y.E. Music World. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the prior written permission of F.Y.E. Music World. Not responsible for type, graphic or other errors. Void where prohibited by law. August 2002.