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Pulp > [August 14, 2003](#) > [Arts](#) > Disc Reviews



DISC REVIEWS

Artist: ELISE LETOURNEAU & HARRY PICKENS
Album: PAS DE DEUX
Label: Peace Café Records
Rating: *** Impressive

A jazz vocalist can't hide behind anything when the accompaniment consists solely of a pianist. With a repertoire of standards like "My Foolish Heart" and "Blame it on My Youth," tunes recorded by the upper echelon of jazz singers, a simple reading of the song just won't cut it. Over-emoting the lyrics has an inverse effect, evoking the faux finish of a Vegas act. Elise Letourneau's voice stands out largely because she sings in the lower alto register, drawing more attention by emphasizing her delivery within that scope and not showing off the extremes of her range. On *Pas de Deux*, "How Insensitive," written by bossa nova writer Antonio Carlos Jobim, is taken at a snail's pace, allowing her to deliver an understated but rather sensual rendition of the minor song. Pianist Harry Pickens backs her with a smooth, almost classical line that puts the song in more of a somber light. Letourneau's phrasing on "Blame it on My Youth" gives certain lines -- "Don't blame my heart" -- a tough delivery rather than wistful nostalgia. On "Willow Weep for Me," a number that challenges the performer from the first note, she delays lines and bends notes over a Pickens' gentle stride, exuding the blue light in a smoky room. Here, Pickens makes the intuitive accompanist, sounding like two players, thanks to sharp left-hand comping that jumps easily around the lower keys. In "Lullaby of Birdland," he shows his chops by quoting "52nd Street Theme" -- Charlie Parker's sign-off tag -- during the intro and his solo, in between his fast walks all over the keys. Four piano-and-spoken-word pieces averaging 60 seconds each appear throughout the album, offering a different perspective on the duo's rapport. The combination of poetry and jazz can prove deadly -- with bad humor or smarmy hipness overcoming a good idea -- but these two have a lot going for them. Letourneau's speaking voice sounds more natural than her vocals, weaving in between piano parts that alternate between riffing and quasi-free explorations.

-- MIKE SHANLEY, Arts & Entertainment editor

In addition to being a singer, Letourneau also plays a few instruments, including the bass flute. She marks the release of her disc with a performance on Saturday, August 16 in a quartet with seven-string guitarist Tim Bedner, drummer Dave Hall and saxophonist Jay Anderson. 8 p.m. Jamie's on the Square, Downtown. 412.471.1722