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ARTS AND LEISURE DESK

MUSIC; A Chosen Calm After the Avant-Garde Storm

By ADAM SHATZ (NYT) 1509 words
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WOODSTOCK, N.Y. - MARILYN CRISPELL has made two of the most beautiful piano trio records in recent memory. Why, then, does she seem so defensive? "I don't feel like I've abandoned anything, though I'm sure there are people who think I have," she said in a recent interview at her apartment here.

Her fears are understandable. There are people -- particularly guardians of the purity of the avant-garde who are always on the lookout for signs of "compromise" -- who will consider her new direction a betrayal of sorts.

Best known as a disciple of the free jazz pianist Cecil Taylor, Ms. Crispell has lately embraced a lyrical, contemplative style reminiscent of Bill Evans, Paul Bley and Keith Jarrett. Imagine Jackson Pollock deciding he'd rather paint like Vermeer, and you'll have an idea of just how dramatic the change is. The fact that it comes relatively late in her career -- she is 54 -- makes it all the more gutsy.

What led Ms. Crispell to overhaul a style that had earned her widespread admiration as well as an ardent if small following over the years? She doesn't have a ready explanation. Instead, she suggests that she has simply "let a part of myself emerge." Ms. Crispell's poetic abilities were always evident, particularly in her interpretations of John Coltrane ballads like "Dear Lord" and "After the Rain." But this aspect of her personality was secondary to the furious glissandos and eruptive energy that distinguished her work until recently. It was the proverbial calm after the storm.

Ms. Crispell's latest record, "Amaryllis," her second for the German label ECM, is named for a red and white flower, native to southern Africa, that blooms in the middle of winter -- a symbol, she said, of "hope and rebirth." Like her previous record, "Nothing Ever Was, Anyway," it features one of the great rhythm sections in jazz: the bassist Gary Peacock and the drummer Paul Motian. The two have worked together on and off since the early 1960's, in bands led by Evans, Mr. Bley and Mr. Jarrett. Mr. Motian, who was a member of Evans's great trio with the bassist Scott LaFaro, is a quiet revolutionary whose role in overthrowing traditional timekeeping is long overdue for critical recognition. Mr. Peacock, a longstanding member of Mr. Jarrett's trio, is the most eloquent of bassists, with a thick sound and a flair for the kind of slow, wintry tunes Ms. Crispell favors.

"Nothing Ever Was, Anyway," the trio's first album, explored the ethereal, forlorn compositions of the singer-songwriter Annette Peacock, the former wife of both Mr. Peacock and Mr. Bley. Released in 1997, it was a ravishing work by a group whose members seemed to enjoy near-complete telepathy. (This appearance was somewhat deceptive: Ms. Peacock conducted the trio's performance of her work.)

"Nothing Ever Was, Anyway" gave the first intimation of a different Ms. Crispell: elegiac, meditative, more inclined to let the spaces between the notes breathe. The Annette Peacock tribute, which marked the beginning of her association with ECM, a label known for an introspective, refined brand of European chamber jazz, seems to have liberated her. Ms. Crispell's new sensibility has grown even more pronounced on the new album. A richly melancholic collection of improvisations and compositions by each member of the trio, "Amaryllis" is less rarefied than her previous record, suffused with a romanticism that "Nothing Ever Was, Anyway" hinted at but ultimately held in check. It's also a record by a mature woman who knows something of solitude: sorrowful yet finally affirmative, in the way that Joni Mitchell can be.

Ms. Crispell, who calls her recent work "a kind of chamber music," is a classically trained pianist. A graduate of the Peabody and New England conservatories, she was hardly aware of jazz until 1975, when a friend introduced her to Coltrane's classic 1964 album "A Love Supreme." "At that moment," she said, "jazz became the huge passion of my life, overriding any other concern I had."

She dropped classical music and began studying jazz with an instructor in Boston. "I am a person of extremes," she said, "and things are rarely halfway with me." By the late 70's she was teaching at the vibraphonist Karl Berger's Creative Music Studio, a sort of Tanglewood for free jazz musicians in Woodstock.

"I remember the day I first met Cecil Taylor," Ms. Crispell said. "He was playing pool, and there was a piano behind the pool room. So I sat at the piano and gave him an impromptu concert, hoping he'd listen. When I was finished he kissed my hand, and said, 'This lady can play!' I'm still flattered to hear my name mentioned in the same breath."

Another guest of the school, the saxophonist and composer Anthony Braxton, invited her to sit in with him. "At our first gig Anthony placed a beer in my hand and said, 'Relax, don't play so many notes.' I was playing like a thousand notes a minute, and he was the first person to make me think of space and breath and phrasing, as opposed to a constant barrage." From 1983 to 1995, Ms. Crispell played in Mr. Braxton's quartet, his last great band.

Although the Creative Music Studio eventually folded, Ms. Crispell has remained in Woodstock. A small woman with shoulder-length light brown hair, hazel eyes and a round, waiflike face, she often rests her head on her shoulder when she talks, closing her eyes and stroking her hair. She retracts nearly everything she says, and what she doesn't retract she qualifies until it amounts to the same thing. She is tentative, a touch fearful about publicity. Her apartment, on the first floor of a house near the woods, is sparely appointed -- in hippie-minimalist fashion, as one would expect -- with Afghan and Mexican rugs, African cloths and American Indian beads. She has a very small collection of CD's (some Coltrane, the Beethoven quartets) and books (fairy tales, Buddhist texts). "I like things sparse and beautiful," she said.

"Sparse and beautiful" would be a fairly accurate description of the music on "Amaryllis," particularly the four pieces that Ms. Crispell calls "free ballads." As she pointed out: "They're completely free, and the interesting thing is that they're in what could be called a more traditional harmonic setting than I usually work in. We had to be very psychically in tune to improvise together in that tonal area."

THE ballads came about at the suggestion of her producer, Manfred Eicher, the German impresario who runs ECM, at a tense moment in the session, which took place last year at Avatar Studios in midtown Manhattan. For what seemed like the hundredth time, Mr. Peacock stopped playing while the tape was rolling. His mind was elsewhere, fixated on a broken pipe in his house that he feared might flood, and the tendinitis in his hand was acting up. He lit a cigarette and paced about the room. Ms. Crispell was almost in tears. ("This recording has taken 10 years off my life," she said.) The only one keeping his cool was Mr. Motian, a short, bald man with a wrestler's build who looks a bit like Alan Arkin.

"This is not going to work unless you're playing together," Mr. Eicher said from the control room. At times the session felt like group therapy led by Mr. Eicher. When the playing was inspired, he rewarded the musicians with praise; when it wasn't, he retreated into silence, like a father withholding love from his children. Now that the dialogue had broken down, the musicians needed encouragement, advice, something. Addressing Mr. Peacock, he said: "Gary, how about a bass solo now? Are your hands O.K.?" Mr. Peacock nodded yes. Mr. Eicher again: "Let's try doing a slow piece, a free ballad, with Gary as the leading voice."

Mr. Peacock started to play again, plucking the strings of his bass forcefully and letting the odd note hang in the air so that its baleful resonance could be fully savored. Mr. Motian entered softly with a roll of the cymbals and then his brushes, followed a few seconds later by Ms. Crispell, who supplied a few exquisitely chosen notes, each implying a subtle yet captivating shift in feeling.

"Yeah, let's make some music!" Mr. Eicher exclaimed from behind the glass, praying the band would sustain its momentum. His prayers were answered. By the end of the piece the trio had gone from introspection to heartbreaking rapture and back again. Ms. Crispell slouched over the piano, looking depleted. In a characteristically operatic gesture, Mr. Eicher burst out of the control room, lifted her up, embraced her and led her in a dance. This was the piece Ms. Crispell decided to call "Amaryllis."

Photo: The jazz pianist Marilyn Crispell in Woodstock, N.Y.: letting "a part of myself emerge." (Chris Ramirez for The New York Times)

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