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DEANNA WITKOWSKI ***Having to Ask (Jazzline)***

Deanna Witkowski is a vibrant young pianist now based in NYC. Her debut release, *Having to Ask*, presents a clear musical vision that fuses straightahead jazz with a variety of Latino and Afro grooves. Jonathan Paul and Rob Amster (bass), Tom Hipskind (drums) and Jose Gregorio (percussion) help Witkowski showcase her original compositions and illuminate her immense musical gifts.

Classically trained, Witkowski discovered jazz in college and studied with pianist Brad Williams and tenor saxophonist Larry Panella. It motivated her to move to Chicago after graduation where she flowered playing in William Russo and Rob Parton's big bands as well as in the all-woman sextet SHE. During that time she also had the opportunity to teach piano in Western Kenya; Witkowski interprets the experience on the upbeat "Rains in Kenya." Scatting along a la Tania Maria on the opener "Happening at Once," Witkowski treats us to her melodic but occasionally thin voice on several pieces including a couple of standards done with a Patricia Barber bent. The Monkish "Cooked Macaroni" features the soprano sax of Jim Gailloreto who is a great discovery as well on tenor and flute. Witkowski got hooked on Latin playing in local salsa bands, and she plays a mean montuno. She has since studied with Cuban pianists Hilario Duran and Chucho Valdes and nods to the former on the cool "Danzon para Hilario."

-Jesse Varela



Review Courtesy AllAboutJazz.com

Having To Ask
Deanna Witkowski | Jazzline Records
By Joel Roberts

Don't confuse Deanna Witkowski's youthful exuberance for lack of musical erudition. On her spirited debut album, *Having to Ask*, the twenty-something pianist/singer/composer exhibits a wide-ranging musical knowledge that belies her tender years.

Nearly everything Witkowski does has a strong Afro/Caribbean taste, reflecting her study with Cuban pianists like Chucho Valdes and time spent in Africa. She even turns a Charlie Parker blues ("Au Privave") into a salsa number. Her original compositions, like the opening "Happening at Once" and the title cut, are complex and colorful, with a catchy, contemporary feel.

Her hushed, Chet Baker-style vocals are featured on a handful of cuts, mostly in the form of wordless scating along with the melody -- a practice that could be annoying, but in Witkowski's quiet, unobtrusive delivery, is quite effective. She also turns in an impressive performance at the piano. A highlight is her stirring solo recital of the ballad, "Blame It On My Youth" (an appropriate choice for the young artist), rendered with subtlety, grace and consummate skill. Backed by a talented small ensemble (trio plus saxophone and Latin percussion), Witkowski makes a sparkling debut.

allmusic

All Music Guide review by Michael G. Nastos

At the age of 25, Witkowski has a lot of background as a Chicago-based pianist/vocalist who studied with Hilario Duran and Chucho Valdes. After relocating to Manhattan, she is music director for a church. Vocally she's reminiscent of Sheila Jordan, and as a pianist she is quite talented and much more mature and developed than many in her peer group. Saxophonist Jim Gailloreto adds much to this date, while split-time bassists Rob Amster or Jonathan Paul, drummer Tom Hipskind, and percussionist Jose Gregorio (five cuts) give their all to support and challenge Witkowski's forward-motion notions. The vocal cuts set Witkowski apart. Her flexible singing pushes a passionate envelope on the waltz treatment of "I'm All Smiles." Wordless lines inform two other tunes: the 6/8 African-based "Happening At Once" uses unison scat, tenor, and piano with Afro-Cuban mambo inserts in the bridge, and the spirit song parallels Gailloreto's soprano. Witkowski's compositions are pretty much Latin in nature, from the hot samba with soprano of "Rains in Kenya," the insistent one-chord setup for the simmering beat and pulsing bass of the title cut, and the light cha-cha with flute and Montuno bridge of "Danzon Para Hilario." The pianist stretches into unusual, far-reaching harmonics in her solo piano intro on the salsa-flavored "Au Privave," while easy swing buoys the Monk-ish melody replete with quirky vehicles of dropped measures, sped and slowed spontaneity, and traded threes (not fours) with Hipskind on "Cooked Macaroni." Breaking her music down into more simple terms, a steady ticktock beat with tenor sax approaches more contemporary neo-bop on "Leaving Space (Last Cha-Cha in Chi-Town)," and her most romantic side is prevalent on the tender solo piano take of "Blame It on My Youth." If Witkowski finds inquiries difficult, it is because she has more answers at such a young age, and she can't be blamed for this. This is a very talented lady who is just getting her feet wet in the jazz wars and likely will produce some stunning music in the future. This is a pretty good effort, collectively and individually, and easily recommended.

Jazz Improv Volume 2, Number 1

Deanna Witkowski Having to Ask

Review by Don Glasgo

There are three pleasant surprises on this accomplished debut recording by Deanna Witkowski: her rhythmic assurance on piano (certainly a reflection of her studies with Cuban pianists Chucho Valdes and Hilario Duran and percussionist Bobby Sanabria); the singularly beautiful, natural quality of her voice (all the more remarkable given her considerable keyboard skills); and her abilities as a composer of complicated yet memorable tunes.

Recorded in Chicago in 1997, *Having to Ask* has many strengths and relatively few weaknesses. "Happening at Once" begins and ends with fetching vocals by Witkowski in an Afro-6 feel. "Rains in Kenya" features nice soprano work by the young Chicago saxophonist Jim Gailloreto, and a tasteful samba-tinged rhythmic feel among Witkowski, bassist Rob Amster and drummer Tom Hipskind. Witkowski's cleverly-written line on "Cooked Macaroni," utilizing irregular meters, delivers a pleasant Monkish quality, with an appealing piano solo by Deanna as well. "Blame It on My Youth," one of three compositions here not by Witkowski, is given a fine contemplative treatment on piano: Deanna's ballad style and touch is mindful of Bill Evans.

"Having to Ask," the title cut in 2-3 clave, has fine solos by Witkowski and Gailloreto, but never quite seems to gel rhythmically with bassist Jonathan Paul and percussionist Jose Gregorio. "Danzon para Hilario" is Deanna's tribute to Hilario Duran, with Gailloreto on flute and a strong rhythmic accompaniment by Witkowski. Again, all the members of the rhythm section don't feel the beat in the same time, with Witkowski and Hipskind being the most assured. "I'm All Smiles," by Leonard and Martin, features Deanna on both vocals and piano, with a melodic, full-bodied bass solo by Rob Amster and very nice work by Tom Hipskind on drums, particularly in the transitions into and out of Deanna's piano solo. There is a particularly appealing lilt and spirit to the vocals and the piano solo here. Beautifully done!

"Starting Over" has effective wordless vocals by Witkowski and a strong, rhythmic piano solo, with, once again, appealing soprano sax by Gailloreto. Parker's "Au Privave" has a fascinating, kaleidoscopic piano intro prior to the flat-out Latin treatment of the tune itself. Once into the tune, Witkowski's unswerving rhythmic ability is striking, especially considering the overly busy percussion (Deanna's unrelenting montuno behind the percussion solo pushes the music into a different time zone!). "Leaving Space," Deanna's goodbye cha-cha to

Chicago- she's now in New York- is the simplest cut here by far, and it's put to good use by some open blowing by Gailloreto on tenor, with a strong piano solo by Witkowski.

Simply put, *Having to Ask* proves that Deanna Witkowski is a major talent. There are really two sessions here: one with and one without a "Latin" rhythm section (it would be wonderful to hear Deanna play with some strong New York Latin players!). To be sure, there are still signs of youth: sometimes Witkowski's piano solos are too reliant upon the manipulation of motives, leading to a lack of long, flowing melodic lines. Nonetheless her astonishing vocal style, her remarkably strong rhythmic concept on piano, and her versatile writing skills more than make up for any youthful shortcomings and mark her as one to watch out for! Even though Witkowski's vocals are secondary in weight to her piano here, I have rarely heard anyone who can both sing and play so well. Deanna's spirit- and her spirituality- come through on this consummate debut album, and that spirit is astonishing.