

Writers are admonished to never begin a story with a quote. But with respect to “Soho Solo” Claire Ritter says it best: “I had fun with this recording. It felt lighthearted yet poignant, with a twist of the South.”

Ritter's playing is direct and succinct – and like the late Rocky Mount, NC-born pianist and composer Thelonious Monk's style, skillful in its use of rests. No run-on sentences and superfluous embellishments. For example, track 10, “Mirrors,” the longest performance, lasts slightly less than four minutes. It is one of her 11 newly composed pieces (including tracks 2, 3, 5, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 17 and 18) made possible by a grant from the Charlotte (NC) Arts & Science Council. Seven of her earlier compositions also appear, along with pianist Ran Blake's “Breakthru” and Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler's familiar “I've Got the World on a String.”

“Creating music which is unique and uplifting is a challenge for any musician,” Ritter says. “While some of the jazz titles are self-explanatory, others in this eclectic mix range between abstract-whimsical tunes to ballads that haunt me. There are also self portraits.” Several tunes – “Integrity,” “Blue Grits,” “Soho Blues,” “Walking Zig, et. al. – employ a stride piano rhythm, reminding you of Monk, Art Hodes, Dave Brubeck and earlier practitioners. There are also impressionistic ballads with descriptive titles and the aptly-titled Latino original, “Sunshades.”

Ritter describes the inspiration for several compositions thus: “Tar” (a nod to my baby Tar Heel sister), “Where the Gardenia Grows” (my grandmother's favorite plant), “Cool Digs” (my studio view of Arabian horses), and “Blue Grits” (a blues take on a favorite Southern morning dish).

“The canvas also stretches across a broad horizon inspired by the sky,” she says, mentioning “Costarican Dawn” (a visit to Osa Peninsula), “Eclipse Orange,” “Blink,” “High Beam” (a rare solar eclipse on the morning of 11/3/2013), “Waltzing the Splendor” and “Punch” (inspired by Georgia O’Keeffe’s bold Texan sky/abstract painting “Orange and Red Streak”), and on the cirque side, “The Chanson” (dedicated to the recent silent French film, “The Artist”). “It’s a jovial portrait of life plus art,” she says. “As the universe revolves around us unpredictably, it’s important for us to continue creating, singing and dancing joyously, in the moment.”

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