

MAHSA VAHDAT & MIGHTY SAM MCCLAIN
Love Duets Across Civilizations: Spirit of Reunion
Kirkelig Kulturverksted - FXCD 351
<http://www.livingblues.com/>

The inspiration for this unique and challenging multi-cultural project was a meeting between the esteemed Iranian singer Mahsa Vahdat and Norwegian poet Erik Hillestad in 2003. The pair worked on several projects over the course of the next few years, eventually bringing in another Iranian artist, poet Mohammad Ebrahim Jafari, for a workshop in France in 2008. That collaboration led to this set of love poems put to music: Hillestad and Jafari wrote the words as poetry, the English and Farsi verses complementing upon and reflecting one another's themes; these words were put to melodies composed by Vahdat, along with Norwegian composers Sigvart Dagsland, Knut Reiersrud, and Jarle Bernhoft. Veteran soul man Mighty Sam McClain was enlisted to share the vocal duties with Vahdat. Befitting the internationalist theme of the project, most of the backing ensemble was recorded in Oslo, the vocal tracks were added in New Hampshire, and Pasha Hanjani's ney (a reed flute) was captured in a studio in Iran.

The result is hardly "blues," but it's deeply moving and inspiring. The instrumentation echoes Middle Eastern tradition, but the melodies are clearly based on modern-day pop conceits (even several melodies based on "old Persian Folk Songs" are updated with decidedly Western-sounding harmonic and chordal flavorings). Vahdat sings Jafari's Farsi lyrics in the impeccably pitched, deeply colored tones of a classically trained vocalist, her smoothly textured voice nonetheless shot through with yearning; McClain delivers Hillestad's English verses in his church-honed, smokey baritone, sometimes adding subtly funky fillips-a "baby" here, a breathy imprecation there-to accentuate the celebratory sensuality of the poems' themes.

But there's more afoot here than mere romance. "Wait 'til our love is free," McClain sings on Ambassador of Hearts. Coupled with the liner notes' insistence that it's the lover's quest to "unite across borders put up by people in power," this makes it clear that the vision here transcends mere romanticism-by spanning their music and love "across civilizations," these artists are suggesting, even demanding, that those of us who believe in the inviolability of the human heart must stand and be counted in our resistance to those on all sides of the political spectrum who would shackle and confine that heart in the chains of ideology and hatred.

-David Whiteis