

Dancing to the Edge

Ann Tappan/Kelly Roberti/MJ Williams (with
Brad Edwards)

Basin, MT, 2007. \$15.

Reviewed by Keith Raether

How, specifically, we come by the spontaneous, enlivening recognitions and associations that a work of art triggers, well ahead of any investigation of the linkage, remains a riddle. Why MJ Williams' latest recording project, *Dancing to the Edge*, stirred for me, immediately and somewhat bittersweetly, Elizabeth Bishop's signature poem, "Questions of Travel," is mystifying. But no matter. A third of the way through my first cycle through the music, on Jaco Pastorious' "Three Views of a Secret" with lyrics by Colleen O'Brien, it happened. Bishop's lines themselves seemed to wink at the unpredictable event: "To stare at some inexplicable old stonework, / inexplicable and impenetrable, / at any view, / instantly seen and always, always delightful?"

A delightful bolt it was, Williams' singing and its reminder of "Questions," Bishop's own prosodic song. ("—A pity not to have heard / the other, less primitive music of the fat brown bird / who sings above the broken gasoline pump / in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:") And not so out of the blue, perhaps.

For the more I listened to *Dancing to the Edge*, the more it yielded an equivalent of Bishop's dialogue, one voice at home (Williams' mainstream moorings), the other abroad (her exploratory treatments of standard material). Implicit in the title of Williams' CD—and confirmed in her playing and that of colleagues (pianist Ann Tappan bassist Kelly Roberti, drummer Brad Edwards)—is a sense of travel. The dancing is *to* something, namely, the edge. Though the recording comprises nine very different songs, most of them familiar, all exhibit the same propensity, an instinct that gets at the core of jazz: travel, stretch, exploration, expansion. Just as Virginia Woolf took us *to* the lighthouse and Bishop *to* "imagined places," so, too, Williams' *Dancing* pulls us toward the margins, the borders, to glimpse a territory as exotic as Ouro Preto was for Bishop.

It may be worth noting, in this context, that Williams is a founding member of the Montana Artists Refuge, a residency program not only for musicians but also writers and visual artists. That she has devoted the past twenty-plus years to the art of interpreting lyrics is clear evidence of her attraction to the writer's medium. That she has chosen for her new recording project three compositions without lyrics in their original form ("Three Views," Monk's "Evidence," Pat Metheny's "Hermitage") and has supplied her own lyrics to one of them ("Hermitage") underscores that affinity.

It should also come as no surprise, mapping Williams' travel as an improvising artist, that she holds singers Sheila Jordan and Jay Clayton in the highest regard. (Williams studied with both of them.) Her reason is simple: Jordan and Clayton are "fearless," in her words. They approach the music with open ears and exploratory sensibilities, especially where harmony and timbre figure into the mix.

That said, the greatest influence on Williams' approach to singing remains her trombone playing, a tradition passed down from her father. Learning the horn, which Williams describes as "very voice-like," has made her a better scat singer, just as singing has made her a more interesting trombone player, particularly in her phrasing. She also brings to the playing field an abiding interest in the work of two avowed explorers in jazz: Henry Threadgill, one of the original members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians and a leader of the groups Air, Sextett, Very Very Circus, and Zooid; and saxophonist David Murray, whose myriad musical settings and projects range from World Saxophone Quartet to the Fo Deuk Revue. Just last year Williams worked with Murray in bassist Roberti's sextet, a group that also included Tappan and Edwards. "Working with David Murray . . . felt like I got a glimpse of some terrain that I suspected existed, but never saw so clearly before," Williams noted.

She has clearly traveled a distance to arrive at the

place where *Dancing* resides—that junction of tradition and modern reconstruction—and no doubt will venture farther in a career that recognizes the improviser's art as a lifelong apprenticeship. Twenty-one years ago Williams was in New York on a Montana Arts Council fellowship, auditing classes with Sheila Jordan at City College of New York. The following year she produced a collection of jazz standards and performed in the New York City Women in Jazz concert program. She has worked with Roberti on and off for some twenty-five years. They have recorded five CDs together, Tappan and Williams have collaborated on four, and Williams, Tappan, and Roberti have recorded twice as a trio. (Their first project, *I Can Hear Your Heart*, was released in 1999.) Like Bill Evans' trios, familiarity breeds adventure.

One element that Williams seems to have gleaned from all of her inspirations—Monk to Mingus to Murray—and has applied to *Dancing* is a decidedly unsentimental approach to potentially sentimental material. Standards notwithstanding (Cole Porter's "I Love You," the Rodgers and Hart chestnut "Lover," Lennon and McCartney's "For No One"), the character of the music on Williams' new CD is anything but cloying. Romantic, yes. Saccharine, hardly. One of the pleasures of *Dancing*—and a rarity in recordings by vocalists anymore—is that it is neither self-conscious nor self-referential. Here again, I'm reminded of

Bishop's voice in putting forth the big questions in "Questions": "Is it right to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theatres?" And: "Oh, must we dream our dreams / and have them too?"

Dancing to the Edge is a recording that seems to reveal layers, not only with each listening but also in the single span of its nine selections. In "I Love You," we're given a good window into Williams' tonal palette, dynamics, and general sensibilities as well as the quartet's conception and articulation. Though their voices are distinctly different, I'm reminded of the sadly unrecognized singer Irene Kral in Williams' treatment of the Porter chestnut that Bing Crosby popularized. There is in her approach something of Kral's deliberateness, understated search, and impeccable taste in choice of material. Kral's style was more delicate and kept to a narrower range, but there was a quality of purposefulness in every word and corresponding musical value. For her part, Williams finds a gentle rain (to purloin a Kral album title) in the upper register and full-throated sound when she swoops down and opens out in the middle. Her scat singing is very horn-like, and like Kral, she uses vibrato judiciously, effectively. The trio behind her works with an independence that recalls Bill Evans' and Kenny Werner's trios, and Tappan's comping comes with fresh harmonic extensions.

Metheny's "Hermitage" and Pastorius' "Three

Views" are pleasant surprises in lyric form. There is a yearning quality in much of Metheny's music, and Williams, Tappan, and Roberti all articulate it in their solos, the latter with dead-on intonation and a tone that conveys lambent light.

With its shifting meters, "Three Views" poses no small rhythmic challenge, and Tappan's negotiation of the labyrinth could be more relaxed. She acquits herself nicely in "Lover," a duet with Williams, supplying arresting harmonic feeds to the singer in a treatment that is as deliberate and tender as the "surrender to my heart" in Hart's lyric.

"Evidence," curiously, bespeaks its title in a personal way for Williams. In it we find the strongest sense of her exploratory nature and the clearest imprint of her horn-playing on her singing. The quartet's reading of Monk's gem has an exploratory character and feel from the start. Similarly, the deliberate treatment of Jobim's "Waters of March" demonstrates the care Williams and her colleagues take with their material, the affinity they have for one another's ideas, and the desire they share to live deep inside each composition.

Like Bishop's verse, the art Williams makes is direct and plainspoken, but with an ear trained closely on the musicality of each phrase. Listening to *Dancing to the Edge*, one can't help but sense a diligence in Williams' work, an awareness that the artist is ever a student, that she never fully arrives—and certainly

never ends—but rather stops from time to time to gather and reflect before resuming the troubling and transporting creation of art. Put another way, there is always a distance to travel in the pursuit of truth.

At the end of “Questions of Travel,” Bishop is left with just that: a question. “Is it lack of imagination that makes us come / to imagined places, not just stay at home? / Or could Pascal have been not entirely right / about just sitting quietly in one’s room?” For Williams, the matter of travel seems nearly an inversion of the question. To “stay at home,” as Bishop would have it, is not an option for the singer. Home for Williams is the very act of travel, the very essence of this thing called jazz.