



Julieta Eugenio's Giant Leap

The young saxophonist has gone from Argentinian student to New York pro

Tenor saxophonist Julieta Eugenio was recently reminded of the distinct pleasure one can derive from masters of her chosen instrument. While cooking at home and listening to *Ben Webster Plays Ballads*, she was struck by the depth of his vibrato. “He sounded like a violin,” she tells *JazzTimes* with awe. “He makes you feel something. That’s what I love about him.”

Eugenio used to play alto as an undergrad back in her home country of Argentina. She grew up about five hours from the “big city” of Buenos Aires, where she attended the Manuel de Falla Conservatory for Jazz Performance.

“I was between medicine and music,” she says, the latter having been her physician father’s career path. “He was like, ‘Well, I’d rather you try doing music first, rather than going into medicine and regretting not doing that,’” she recalls. “I knew that if I studied medicine, I wouldn’t have time to play. So, I was like, ‘I have to try focusing on what I want to do.’”

Like many saxophonists, Eugenio gravitated toward John Coltrane as a youngster.

But something about his style didn’t feel right for her. “I was trying to be like him, and I was missing the lower register,” she says. When Eugenio switched to tenor, a new kind of voice emerged from deep within her. Within that part of her instrument’s range, she grew from an imitator into a communicator.

Which leads us to *Jump*, Eugenio’s debut album as a leader, featuring bassist Matt Dwonczyk and drummer Jonathan Barber and released on trumpeter Dave Douglas’ Greenleaf label. The title is meant to refer to her move to New York—one countless students of the music have taken—but it can be more meaningfully understood simply through her tone. Embracing a nonchordal trio format, Eugenio sounds relaxed yet lively, plugged into tradition yet seemingly up for anything.

Barber crossed paths with Eugenio while making the rounds on the New York scene, both at Smalls, where Barber ran jam sessions, and elsewhere. “I thought it was cool how she was from Argentina and went to New York to get even more of an experience with this music,” he says. The two became fast friends—and collaborators.

Eugenio mostly played standards early on, but then brought out her original music, which Barber found intriguing. “It was a little different than the quote-unquote standard A-B-A form, or contrafacts, or things of that nature,” he recalls. “She had her own personality with what she wrote.”

Around the clubs, Eugenio also met Dwonczyk, one of Barber’s best friends. Stylistically, the bassist quickly ascertained where she was coming from. “I guess the opposite would be Coleman Hawkins: loud and strong. She is strong, and can be that way too,” he says. “But at the same time, she doesn’t need to play extremely aggressively to say what she’s trying to say through her instrument. She writes the melodies [of her compositions] first, then puts chords to [them], which is very interesting. And of course, the melodies are beautiful.”

Together, in Connecticut, the trio recorded *Jump*, a mellow yet decisive set of mostly originals. Eugenio’s tunes include the searching “Efes”; the subtly dark-hued “La Jungla”; and “Raccoon Tune,” a loping ode to the titular pest. Two standards—“Flamingo” and “Crazy He Calls Me”—are woven in. It all ends with the elegant “Tres,” leaving a profound impression of a fresh new voice on the scene.

“One thing that struck me about the recording is how mature it is. It’s not a rushed, virtuoso, showy, tour-de-force first release, which happens to people a lot,” Douglas tells *JazzTimes*, citing Eugenio’s “super-warm tone—very poised, inside the tunes.”

Of course, none of this came overnight. “It hasn’t been easy and it’s not easy still, but I keep pushing,” Eugenio says, declaring there are “no bad shows,” just learning experiences.

Her mind drifts back to the poignant sound of tenorists like Webster, which she keeps chasing. “I never get tired of

listening to it,” she says. If you feel similarly, you may want to jump into the music of Julieta Eugenio.

—MORGAN ENOS

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