

From Eva to Elettra

George De Stefano (January 02, 2010)



Sicilian singer/songwriter Carmen Consoli returns with a new album and US tour

The Sicilian singer and songwriter Carmen Consoli has called herself “una piccola cantantessa” (a little girl singer), but now that she’s 35 years old, the self-deprecating diminutive doesn’t fit. Then again, maybe it never did. Since she released her debut album, “Dueparole,” in 1996, the Catania-based Consoli has been a formidable figure with big ideas and ambitions, and the talent to realize them.

Italy’s leading female rock artist, Consoli has been gradually building a following in the United States over the past few years, with appearances at showcase venues like Joe’s Pub in Manhattan and rock festivals like South by Southwest. In 2007, she performed at Central Park’s renowned Delacorte



Theater, home to the New York Shakespeare Festival. She performs at the City Winery in Manhattan on January 8. That show is sold out, a sign that Consoli is making inroads in the U.S. market.

Consoli is a gifted lyricist with a woman-centric viewpoint and a musician equally adept at tender, introspective ballads and fierce, roiling rockers. With her powerful voice that can go from a breathy purr to a Joplin-esque wail, and her charismatic stage presence, Consoli cuts a compelling figure on recordings and in concert. She also can be alluringly subtle, exuding a slow-burn sensuality that's hard to resist.

She's given reign to the latter side of her musical personality in recent years, releasing, in 2006, "Eva contro Eva," an album that was a significant departure from her previous work. Instead of electric guitars and rock grooves, there were acoustic guitars, mandolins, violins, accordions, bouzoukis, and even a string quartet. The tempos were slow to medium, and Consoli's vocals were more conversational than declamatory.

The lyric writing was extraordinary; one Italian critic, noting that the songs collectively constituted a portrait of contemporary Sicily, likened "Eva" to "Spoon River Anthology," Edgar Lee Masters' 1916 prose-poem about inhabitants of a fictional Illinois town.

The change in direction continues on "Elettra," Consoli's latest release. Like its predecessor, "Elettra" is a concise work, 10 songs in some 40 minutes. It also sounds much like "Eva," with mainly acoustic instrumentation and stylistic influences drawn from Sicilian *musica popolare* and other Mediterranean folk music.

In a recent interview, Consoli said that although "'Eva contro Eva' is the direction that I want to follow," the new album is focused more on lyrics than on sonic exploration. And what's most on her mind is women's lives and experience - including their complicated relationships with men - lovers, fathers, and uncles.

The album's opening track, "Mandaci una cartolina" was inspired by the sudden death of her father Giuseppe last year. Though there's obviously deep feeling in the words, there's also irony; death is likened to an unplanned holiday, a surprise vacation. Consoli wonders, "Of all the days on which you could've left why did you think of Monday?" Then, she asks him to "send us a postcard and a nice photo of you taking the sun on the beach."

There are no warm feelings, ironic or direct, on "Mio Zio." The narrator recalls the eponymous uncle, now dead, as a sexual abuser who used to put "his greedy hands between my legs." But the niece's revelation of the abuse brought her only disbelief and scorn. Here the music is more agitated, angrier, reminiscent of "Matilde odiava i gatti," Consoli's memorable portrait of explosive female rage from her 2002 album, "L'Eccezione."

The album's title character is not the Elektra of Greek mythology who instigated her brother to matricide; instead she's a prostitute who, though she practices a trade that subjects her to "indignant gazes," is moved by genuine emotion and passion; she craves a lover who will "embrace me, in the light of day."

Though Consoli has said that words and stories are central to "Elettra," the music is as sophisticated and captivating as her lyrics. Backed mostly by members of her excellent touring band, Consoli sings with warmth, subtlety and vivid emotion. On "'A Finestra" her staccato phrasing and earthy timbre recall the great Sicilian folksinger (and Consoli role model) Rosa Balestrieri. Consoli displays her chops on electric guitar, bouzouki, and bass on "Marie ti amiamo," co-written with another distinguished catanese, Franco Battiato. Sung in Arabic, Italian, and French by Consoli, Battiato, and guest vocalist Said Benmenni, "Marie," with its allusive lyrics and sensual pan-Mediterranean ambiance, provides some of "Elettra's" most arresting moments.

"Col Nome Giusto," opening with an allusion to Domenico Modugno's "La Lontananza," is another high point, a tuneful and entrancingly romantic ballad in which the singer ruminates on love's confusing contradictions, at the end expressing the certainty that "one day we will call all this by its



right name.”

Cerebral and passionate, tender and angry, inward looking but acutely attuned to social realities, Carmen Consoli’s “Elettra” captures a remarkable artist at a crucial stage in her career. The former “piccola cantantessa” and “bambina impertinente” (another self-chosen moniker) is now mature, but still evolving, rooted in a particular place and culture yet universal in her concerns and, as I like to think, in her appeal.

Carmen Consoli performs Friday, January 8, at City Winery in Manhattan. The show is sold out.

“Elettra” is available as an import and from I-Tunes.

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