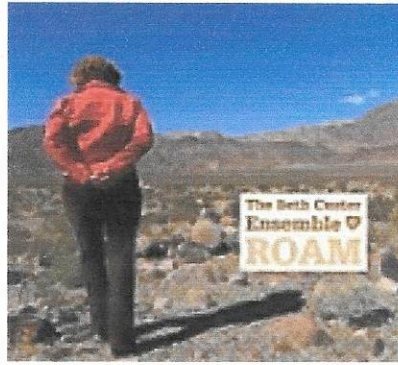


Memory Select: Avant-jazz radio



Beth Custer's Do-Over

The Beth Custer Ensemble — *Roam* (BC, 2009)

Beth Custer managed to secure an autumn 2009 date at Yoshi's San Francisco for a CD release concert for *Roam*. That night happened to bring torrential rains that flooded Yoshi's, canceling the show. The rain-check date is tomorrow, Jan. 5.

Custer performs in any number of contexts. She's done improvised music (a clarinet pointed into a bowl was her trademark promo photo for a while). Her Vinculum Symphony was an exercise in large-scale experimenting. She's done jazz, with bands like *Clarinet Thing* (noted [here](#)). She's written any number of soundtracks for small films, plays, and dance productions.

Roam, though, is about songs — regular ol' songs, often with jazzy backing. Catchy stuff that AOR radio stations ought to take notice of. It's fun, but it's also grown-up. Custer's voice takes center stage, a lightly silky sound that can dig deep into earthy soul, and a tone that lets you know you don't have to be in a hurry.

The album opens with a handful of unattached tracks, songs apparently written for no particular project. These are some of the best, actually; "Roam" is one the album's more uptempo songs, but what really caught my ear were the slow funk drawl of "Hometown" and especially the serious-minded but soulful "Crux of Murder:" "Stand up / To the droll of the masses / Raise high / To the call of your soul."

Seven of the 12 songs feature lyrics by *Octavio Solis*, a playwright who's apparently a *big deal* in such circles. (He's done a few recent commissions for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, at any rate.) They're excerpted from musicals performed by the Campo Santo theater company.

"Jackrabbit" and the lingering, sad "God Made Night" shift the sound to real country. "The Ballad of Pancho & Lucy" and "There It Was" are less country-twangy and more into a

whimsical mode. (The former is cuter but the latter rocks out more in the chorus and includes a nifty guitar-twang solo).

Extra bonus: The CD includes "Dymaxion Transport," a cool little instrumental that's part of a song cycle about Buckminster Fuller. Clarinet Thing performed it at Yoshi's, I think. It's got a soothing, swaying melody, followed by something like a prog-rock seizure. Custer is backed by David James on guitar and Jan Jackson on drums (they accompanied her for a [short Yoshi's set in June](#)), with extra jazz power from Chris Grady (trumpet), [Lisa Mezzacappa](#) (bass), and Graham Connah (piano). (How great is it to see Connah's name on a CD again. I know he's performed occasionally as Admiral Ted Brinkley (semi-ret.), but I still remember the incredible jazz combos he led in the '90s.) Connah is in mostly a supporting role here, but he gets a good solo in the mysterious, poking rhythm of "Will/Bill" and a crisp jazzy solo in "Roam."