

Pianist/Composer Yelena Eckemoff Recollects Childhood in Russia Through Sense of Smell on *Blooming Tall Phlox*, Featuring an All-Finnish Lineup of Young Rising Stars

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Blooming Tall Phlox is Yelena Eckemoff's tenth album since shifting gears from the classical music of her early career and a mid-career break to raise her children, into a more firmly and decidedly jazz focus with the 2010 release of *Cold Sun*. Playfully imbued with vitality, energy, creativity and, perhaps most importantly, an unrelenting sound of surprise that reveals more with each and every listen, *Blooming Tall Phlox* proves that it is possible to reinvent oneself. Over six years and ten recordings, Eckemoff has evolved into a deeply creative jazz artist: not just a pianist capable of engaging with some of the finest jazz musicians on the planet, but a composer/arranger who can surprise them with unexpected and enigmatic music that drives them to even further levels of excellence.

Augmented by her compelling artwork and poetry, Eckemoff now adds the impact of human senses to her music and in the case of *Blooming Tall Phlox*, its that of smell. Increasingly imbued by her distinctive, recognizable approach to melody, song titles like "Apples Laid Out on the Floor," "Wildflower Meadows" and "Old Fashioned Bread Store" not only palpably evoke these alluring odors, but provide both vivid and immediate imagery and inspiration for this double release divided into two parts: *Summer Smells* and *Winter Smells*.

"I had the idea of writing music about smell for some time before I met with [drummer] Olavi [Louhivuori] in Finland," Eckemoff says. "The idea came into focus when I saw how much Finland reminded me of Russia; it became obvious to me that it would be the best place to record an album about various aromas. I brought fifteen songs to the session, already named and designed to express certain smells. Writing the poetry came later, even though I nurtured my ideas along with the music. Then I had to select a title for the album but as I was writing my poems it became clear that there is one smell that triggers my childhood memories: the smell of the phlox. So I decided to paint a picture of myself in my grandparent's garden, sniffing the phlox, based on a black and white photograph from the time."

Creating increasingly multi-disciplinary music is not Eckemoff's only change with *Blooming Tall Phlox*. Following a string of recordings with internationally renowned Norwegian musicians like Arild Andersen, Tore Brunborg, Jon Christensen and Mats Eilertsen, and A-list Americans including Peter Erskine, Billy Hart, Mark Turner, Joe Locke and Mark Feldman, Eckemoff recruited some of Finland's best young, up-and-coming players for this outing. In addition to trumpeter **Verneri Pohjola**, already garnering international attention for his series of recordings for Germany's ACT label, and **Olavi Louhivuori**, whose contributions to albums on the heralded ECM label with artists including Tomasz Stańko and Mats Eilertsen have, since 2009, also placed the drummer and percussionist on the global map, Eckemoff enlisted vibraphonist **Panu Savolainen** and double bassist **Antti Lötjönen**--two rising stars in their own country, and both already showing the promise of even broader recognition.

Eckemoff's range is broad, as a pianist, composer and arranger. Her music can seamlessly move between ethereal abstractions and arpeggio-driven thematic constructs; bolstered by an organic meshing of frenetic grooves and in-the-moment interaction, providing contexts for expressive improvisational élan from Eckemoff and her exceptional quintet, the pianist's firm yet subtle touch successfully unveiling, indeed, the character of her Bechstein. With the exception of a small handful of through-composed material, most of album's fifteen compositions demonstrate a remarkable confluence of form and freedom, couched within the context of some of Eckemoff's most challenging yet appealing charts to date. And yet, despite the openness, the immediacy and unpredictability that pervades much of the album, there's no shortage of affecting lyricism, whether it's the thematically rich "Wildflower Meadows" or temporally fluid tone poem "Sleeping in the Tent," where Eckemoff's scripted lines provide expansive improvisational opportunities.

Blooming Tall Phlox also demonstrates, between Eckemoff's impeccable playing and interaction with her superb bandmates, that her early classical training/experience may still be a part of her DNA, but what she is doing now is irrefutably jazz. It's a potent combination that, with *Blooming Tall Phlox*, not only raises her own already high bar, but those of Pohjola, Savolainen, Lötjönen and Louhivuori as well.

The album is both a consistent fit within Eckemoff's overall discography and a move into areas previously unexplored for a pianist who, rather than constantly thinking about where she is now, is always (and, at this moment, already) thinking ahead. She already has her next album in the can and, if the exceptional *Blooming Tall Phlox* is any indication, it will no doubt continue the upward trajectory that this daring pianist/composer has been on since she first appeared in the jazz world just six short years ago.

Yelena Eckemoff · *Blooming Tall Phlox*
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