

Ronnie Taheny  
*Renaissance Point*

Some artists issue a double album as a grand indulgence. Ronnie Taheny doesn't play that game; her canny decision after four years away from the recording studio to simultaneously issue twin discs – the more sparse, vocal-driven *Renaissance* album, and with more lush pop treatments contained on the accompanying *Point* album – allows full exploration of two distinctly different aspects of her musical performance. This separation of the austere from the embellished has provided the impetus for Taheny and producer Jarred Payne to focus intently on the essence of each style, accurately and carefully shaving and shaping to reveal more deftly the musical and emotional kernel of each song.

With the introduction of Taheny's live performance colleagues The Outhouse Orchestra to this recording project – adding flute, cello and sweeping beds of vocal harmony – a wider palate of sound colours are available, though wisely used sparingly and with discretion. Indeed, less proves more compelling, particularly on the *Renaissance* album. Its musical fragility and starkness not only pulls sharp focus on sweet tunes and strong vocal performances (among the most arresting of Taheny's 14-year solo recording career), but also draws a bead on the emotional tenor of such songs as *Letter to the Muses*, *Give It Back* and *Artemisia*. While the musical fabric is brief, mostly stripped to skeletal piano chords, the power of unadorned voices to carry the emotion is, in many places, riveting – none more than in a triumphant, sombre re-visitation of her most popular song, *Photograph*.

Lessons learned in restraint certainly carry over to the *Point* album, where the pop is lean and taut while still being luscious and gorgeously textural, using embellishment selectively. There's understated intelligence at work here: bright, shimmering tunes such as *The Thinker* and *Good Day* that burst with radiant, sunny melodies are always countered by a clever twist, usually carrying a sting in the tale. Indeed, the album's shining centrepiece, *Wasting Away*, shows off this delicate balancing act with aplomb, its raw emotion being especially striking. Always a canny lyricist, Taheny has largely been a narrative storyteller through her career, spinning yarns about characters and situations she closely observes, though here it seems entirely more personal; this time she's looking in the mirror and exposing private thoughts. It allows the songs to ache with a tenderness and vulnerability that Taheny hasn't dared to reveal before. Indeed, it's a brave move for any artist to give so much of themselves, though it's entirely compelling, enticing you to go back for a second listen – and once you do, the strong spine of these compositions ensures that they stick in your consciousness.

This double disc is a daring excursion but sits together smartly as a cohesive package, digging deep to the source of Taheny's muse – and, importantly, the luxury of such a broad canvas has given her the confidence to stretch herself further as an artist, even broaching darker moods and more gritty, brooding sounds (evident on *Glacial* and *Trade*). This time, the truth in Taheny's songs runs deeper, demanding and receiving outstanding, emotive vocal performances as she opens up to reveal more raw and brittle emotion. Rarely do you hear such great warmth and generosity in smart pop music.

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