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CD REVIEW

With 'Somewhere,' Potter's going places

By Sarah Rodman, Globe Staff | August 7, 2007

If Grace Potter and the Nocturnals were all revved up and ready to go on their 2006 debut, "Nothing But the Water," they've busted out of the blocks on the follow-up, "This Is Somewhere."

The Vermont-based quartet exudes a burning desire to run fast, free, and forward on this instantly likable collection of straight-up-the-middle rock 'n' roll, out today. And run they do thanks to their instrumental chops and Potter's husky wail.

While the band has become a mainstay on the jam-band scene, it has always taken its cues from classic rockers like Neil Young, Tom Petty, Bonnie Raitt, and Sheryl Crow. All of those artists have the ability to stretch out in concert but recognize the value of a more compact pop template on record. Grace Potter and the Nocturnals follow that lead on "Somewhere."

But even as they traffic in familiar sounds, an irresistible sense of youthful excitement permeates every track. That verve isn't too surprising given that band members are all still in their early 20s, and for them "Live Rust" isn't a relic but a fresh inspiration. On "Somewhere" Potter the songwriter is not only catching up to her heroes but to her own vocal gifts. She dramatically raises her lyrical and melodic game to more closely match the considerable energies of her singing and her organ playing, as well as those of her bandmates, guitarist Scott Tournet, drummer Matt Burr, and bassist Bryan Dondero.

The playfully upbeat "Mr. Columbus" finds Potter pecking away at a potential exploring compatriot. On "Ain't No Time" she scarcely has the patience to stick with the rolling and tumbling groove exclaiming that there are "far too many things to do before the day is through."

The singer and her band are so lively, in fact, it's hard to believe, on the rollicking "Here's to the Meantime," when Potter complains "You're running me ragged." This down-and-dirty guitar and Hammond B-3 gem is one the Allman Brothers Band would be proud to claim as its own.

Opener "Ah Mary" is a blistering, raised fist that seemingly concerns the manipulative machinations of a woman. At the tail end Potter serves up her twist as the title phrase transforms into "Ah-mary-ca."

The ballads are slower in tempo but equally appealing as Potter powers down into a sultry murmur for "Lose Some Time" and shows off a pretty glissando on "You May See Me."

Most impressively, the band closes with the gospel-drenched bang of "Big White Gate." Potter assumes the guise of an 84-year-old woman who's lived a life of sin but hopes to squeak by St. Peter because "all the folks up in heaven might like to hear me sing."

If that old lady sounds anything like Grace Potter, she's a shoo-in. ■