

Annual Women's Issue and CD

The stories behind the music of
some of today's leading ladies

JAZZ 17[®]

art for your ears



Hiromi stretches
her fingers

Classic Carla Bley

Dianne Reeves
answers the call

Pamela Williams and
Mindi Abair have
nothing in common

cassandra WILSON

Stories of a small-town girl

Plus: Peggy Lee, Anita O'Day, Annie Ross,
Doris Day, and Mary Lou Williams

JULY 2006 vol.23No07



Underground diva

By Jonathan Widran

Over the past year, a handful of veteran smooth jazz stars turned the concept of old school and contemporary soul cover songs into a cottage industry. Leading the pack were Richard Elliot and Rick Braun, who launched their own ARTizen Music label with the monster radio hits "People Make The World Go Round" (Elliot) and "Shining Star" (Braun). Kirk Whalum paid homage to a more recent soul legend on his Rendezvous Music debut, *Performs The Babyface Songbook*, while Kim Waters (on *All For Love*) took a dreamy, ambient approach to Aretha Franklin's "Daydreaming" — with a great assist from the rich and smoky vocals of Maysa.

Inspired by this session, **Maysa** — a self-described "Underground Diva" best known for her decade of contributions to British neo soul/acid jazz ensemble Incognito — asked herself why these sensuous dips into retro-romance were always done by the boys. Given the green light by Waters' label, Shanachie, to offer a feminine perspective, she began plowing through hundreds of songs that inspired her growing up. Her Top 10 list translates effortlessly to her label debut, the mostly easy-grooving but sometimes swinging and jazzy *Sweet Classic Soul*.

Maysa's mix of very familiar and obscure songs were popularized by artists who need only one name to inspire warm flashbacks: Stevie, Chaka, Teddy ("Come Go With Me"), and Barry ("Playing Your Game, Baby"), in addition to tracks originated by The Stylistics ("Betcha By Golly Wow," "Love Comes Easy"), Major Harris ("Love Won't Let Me Wait"), and Rose Royce (whose "Wishing On A Star" Maysa chooses to open with). But the singer didn't set out to just do a nice mix of favorite tunes. Feminists, listen up. Underneath that cool vibe, Maysa — whose four previous solo albums have all touched on issues of raising self-esteem — had a role-reversing agenda.

"I wanted this to be a lady's-mackin'



"I want women everywhere to be inspired here, but I also admit I did it for myself because I'm out there looking for a husband, too." — Maysa

record, pure and simple," she says unabashedly. "It's time we stopped waiting around for the guys to ask us out and took the romantic initiative, which includes setting the mood with our favorite R&B songs. I want women everywhere to be inspired here, but I also admit I did it for myself because I'm out there looking for a husband, too. What's wrong with girls seducing guys? The fun part was, even though I close the set with songs by Chaka Khan and Roberta Flack, two of the greatest female singers ever, overall I wanted to do men's songs that nobody would expect a woman to even try."

Khan and Rufus' "Any Love" and Flack's "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" are by design buried beneath the boy-oriented stuff, but it's telling that they're Maysa's greatest artistic triumphs here. Growing up in Baltimore, she learned how to scat not from Ella Fitzgerald (the standard female response) but by listening to and analyzing instrumental solos by John Coltrane and Miles Davis. After wailing powerfully through the disco-fied thump of "Any Love" for a few minutes, Maysa engages in an inventive scat improvisation — a moment

unlike any other on the disc that simply doesn't last long enough.

She pays haunting homage to Flack on a version that begins with simple piano harmonies and orchestral flavoring. Boding well for Maysa's potential to do more serious straight-ahead jazz projects, the track evolves into a tender trio arrangement, with all instruments performed by project producer Chris "Big Dog" Davis. It's no surprise that this is Maysa's favorite track on the album — she's long credited Flack for helping her develop her own sense of phrasing and tone. She also has a personal connection to Stevie Wonder that inspired the funky justice she does to his rollicking "All I Do." Maysa met him when she was a senior at Morgan State University, and after graduating, she moved to Los Angeles to be part of his background vocal group Wonderlove in 1991 and 1992.

"I really wanted 'All I Do' to mean something, but also to get people on the dance floor," she says. "He was so strong politically, and his lyrics had the power to induce change. Even though I don't have the professional connection to the other artists,

Photo by Cary Ollaephe

personal taste

Jonathan Widran

- ▲ **Donald Fagen Morph The Cat** (Reprise) — A brilliant solo project from the Steely Dan singer that features the same classic, brassy pop-soul-jazz the band was poppin' in the '70s.
- ▲ **David Garfield & Friends A Tribute To Jeff (Revisited)** (Creatchy)
- ▲ **Barry Manilow The Greatest Songs of the Fifties** (Arista)
- ▲ **Erin Boheme What Love Is** (Concord Jazz)
- ▲ **Taylor Eigsti Lucky To Be Me** (Concord Jazz)

new and noteworthy

- ▲ **Pamela Williams Elixir** (Shanachie)
- ▲ **Matt Marshak Groovosphere** (Nuance Music Group)
- ▲ **Steve Briody Keep On Talkin'** (215 Records)
- ▲ **Marion Meadows Dressed To Chill** (Heads Up)
- ▲ **Nelson Rangell Soul To Souls** (Koch)

there are stories behind the reasons I chose them. I first heard The Isley Brothers ('Don't Say Goodnight') when I was teaching myself to sing, and they inspired me to want to sound sexy. I'm just trying to be honest here, paying full respect to the artists and writers by doing their songs in my own unique way, but without writing my own stuff on top of it or going on tangents just to be clever."

Although Maysa has been touring extensively this year with Incognito, there's no doubt that *Sweet Classic Soul* goes a long way to helping her further establish an identity apart from the vision of Incognito frontman Jean-Paul "Bluey" Maunick. She's also currently seeking grants for a proposed educational concert tour she calls "Revenge Of The Underground Divas," which is designed to teach young singers about the realities of the music business. Already signed up are Lalah Hathaway, Ledesi, Caron Wheeler, and N'Dea Davenport.

"I think if singers like us had started our careers in the '70s, we'd be on a whole other level, because what we do now was the Top 40 music of the time," Maysa says. "I just want to remind people of how they felt when they first heard these great songs. In those days, the vibe was: the more musicians in the band, the better. Musicians were allowed to create with each other in the days before everything became so producer-driven. It was a time when souls were communicating through music, and it's nice to revisit that place while giving a glimpse of this deeply personal side of myself."

Worth it

In a 2002 review of **Steve Oliver's** second album *Positive Energy*, I used this space to declare: "With apologies to Disneyland, wherever [Oliver] is, wherever he's playing transforms into the happiest place on earth." Four years, two discs and hundreds of live shows (and smooth jazz cruises) later, it's great to see that the guitarist and vocalist is still as chipper as ever. The title of his second Koch Records CD says it all: *Radiant*.

While he invited big guns like Eric Marienthal and Harvey Mason to the show on 2004's 3-D, here he strips down to a simple production approach, working

for the most part with Michael Broening, who produced Marion Meadows' last two projects. That gives more space to his immediately identifiable nylon strings and voice. It's hard not to feel the essence of the album concept with perfectly titled tracks like "Feeling Good," "Tradewinds," and the Latin-spiced fusion gem "Good To Go."

While he's done covers in the past, they weren't as memorable as his rich, soulful version of Stephen Stills' Buffalo Springfield classic "For What It's Worth." It's a taste of social consciousness in the midst of all the jubilation and tender romance. ▲



Introducing Amber Whitlock

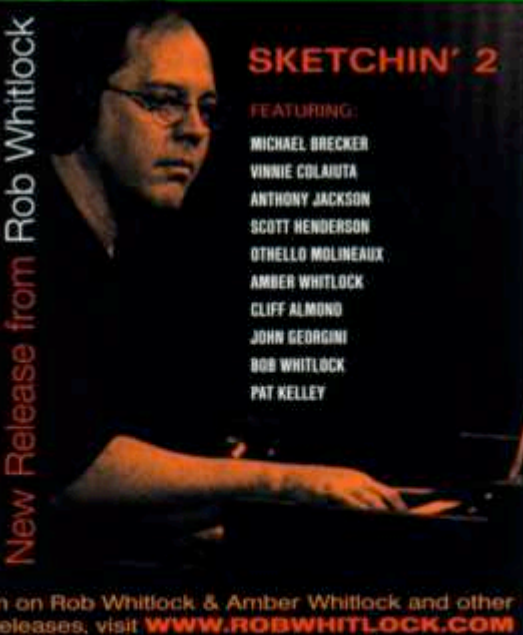
“Amber Whitlock may be the best kept secret in the world of jazz vocalists, female or otherwise. Her voice is fresh but seasoned, strong yet delicate, rich and giving in its texture.”

— JAZZED WITH MONTE BYRD, VALLEY LIVING MAGAZINE

Amber's second album *The Circle* is coming soon on Sketchin' Records.



NOW AVAILABLE AT: robwhitlock.com amazon.com



New Release from Rob Whitlock


“These recordings belong on the “A” list, “top shelf,” and “5 stars” efforts of any jazz work in the last 10 years.”

— RICK CALIC, JAZZROCKWORLD.COM

SKETCHIN' 2

FEATURING:

- MICHAEL BRECKER
- VINNIE COLAIUTA
- ANTHONY JACKSON
- SCOTT HENDERSON
- OTHELLO MOLINEAUX
- AMBER WHITLOCK
- CLIFF ALMOND
- JOHN GEORGINI
- BOB WHITLOCK
- PAT KELLEY



NOW AVAILABLE AT: robwhitlock.com amazon.com

For more information on Rob Whitlock & Amber Whitlock and other Sketchin' Records releases, visit WWW.ROBWHITLOCK.COM