

## IN PRINT



*Ella: A Novel*  
Diane Richards (Amistad)  
by Sophia Valera Heinecke

As a work of historical fiction, *Ella: A Novel* was released as a “reimagining [of] the turbulent and triumphant early years of Ella Fitzgerald,” and as such is a product of author Diane Richards’ imagination. Richards’ prose is solid and detailed, and the story she chooses to tell is coherent, grappling with the existential notion that you can be anything you want to be, or you are nothing at all.

Most of the book takes us back to the hard times of Fitzgerald’s life, memories that flood back to her at a point when the vocalist was on the precipice of cementing her fame. The story shifts back to 1932, though, when she was in high school in humdrum Yonkers, NY, centering her steadfast desire to be a dancer. Her mother’s sudden death prompts her to become the provider for her angelic sister and alcoholic stepfather, but the young Fitzgerald is

compelled to leave when she faces neglect and forced labor and the abuse of her stepfather, who, drunker than usual, tries to sexually assault her.

Despite being overwhelmed with responsibilities, her aunt in Harlem takes her in. Eager to contribute financially so she is not a burden, Ella begins skipping school and running numbers while trying to lock in Zukie Cabell as her competition dance partner. While out and about with Zukie, he is gunned down in a drive-by shooting. The police interrogate her about Zukie’s murder, then take her away. She soon finds herself on the bus headed to the hellish New York Training School for Girls. While the major plot points of the book are easily derived from real life facts, it’s challenging to wonder about the purpose of imagining the minutiae of hardship in between death and abandonment. Later, at “Amateur Night at The Apollo,” she decides to ditch dancing on a whim, and instead sings. She wins, her voice described as “pure,” a result of finding herself within at the training school. The rest, as they say, is history.

Richards posits that self-knowledge derives from returning to the past to examine responses to the worst circumstances. Song may fill the world with possibility and hope, but this is not a feeling left from reading *Ella: A Novel*. The suffering depicted is, in many moments, a great teacher, but not one that feels newly imagined.

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*Rare*  
Sophie Agnel/John Butcher  
(Les Disques VICTO)  
*Draw Bridge*  
Sophie Agnel/Michael Zerang  
(Relative Pitch)  
by Ken Waxman

Sophisticated and experienced French pianist Sophie Agnel frequently plays with European innovators, including saxophonists Daunik Lazro and Martin Küchen, bassist John Edwards and drummer-percussionist Steve Noble. *Rare* unites the pianist with UK tenor-soprano saxophonist John Butcher, who has partnered with more international improvisers than she, while *Draw Bridge* is Agnel’s initial recording with veteran drummer Michael Zerang, whose playing situations radiate from his Chicago home base to over three dozen countries. One distinguishing feature of the pianist’s playing is her overt percussiveness, smacking the keyboard or the instrument’s wood with full force, strumming or pulsating its internal strings. The upshot is that Butcher often appears to be improvising alongside a pianist *and* a drummer, while at points *Draw Bridge* could be a percussion duet.

*Rare* shows the pianist/saxophonist duo probing cohesion and challenge. Butcher’s extended techniques help move the five-part improvisation beyond the expected. Starting with horizontal smears, he escalates to undulating flutters, irregular note bending and toneless breaths. Just when it seems he’s content playing at a languid pace with dissonance widening every tone extremity, he switches to domineering slap tonguing and body tube whooshes using staccato yelps and reed mastication to complete Agnel’s unrelenting and stressed pianism. Dynamically knitting together single note clanks and bell-tolling-like echoes, Agnel torques tremolo keyboard slides and individual stabs into a passionate horizontal line. Scattered among these processional dynamics, which slide into pedal point as often as they tickle the highest keys, she fragments time by interspersing guitar-like twanging and shuffling metal objects on the string set. The distinctive instance of her mixture of pianism and percussion occurs on “Rare II” since the equivalency between her funereal note tolling and Butcher’s concentrated saxophone drone includes brief interludes, which lessens tension enough to reveal quasi-delicacy in her playing while the saxophonist’s split tones turn linear.

A different intensity dominates the Agnel-Zerang duets on *Draw Bridge*, since her percussion-like contours are paramount. Although the pianist pivots to *faux* drum intimations, Zerang is above all a percussionist. Unlike Butcher’s breath-propelled contours, sheer physicality gives the drummer’s processes more dynamics. Crucially though, his focus is scrubbing woody textures, clanging different-sized cymbals, ringing bell trees and ratcheting shrieks, rather than creating regularized ruffs. Cogitation trumps clout. Instances are prominent on tracks including “Swing Point” and “Cable-Stayed”. On the former Agnel’s stopped piano key throbs create the defining groove, while Zerang’s whistling squeaks and steel drum-like tremors provide expressive flourishes. On “Cable-Stayed” his prestissimo sandpaper-like scrapes and striated notching play a similar role as the pianist’s processional chording introduce and complete the exposition with a mid-

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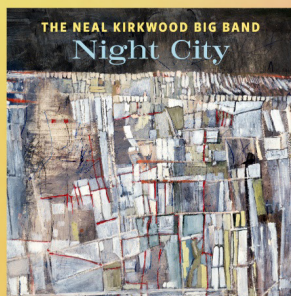
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