

ENCORE



KAREN MANTLER

A WELCOME HAUNT WITHIN
BY JOHN PIETARO

"I grew up on the road," Karen Mantler explains, "and people say this is pretty cool, but it was simply normal at the time. My mother was working and needed to take care of me, so she threw me into the music." And so began a "pretty cool" career ensconced in the hippest pool of new sounds and edge-of-jazz artistry. Mantler, pianist, singer and composer, who's the daughter of Carla Bley and Michael Mantler, could have been a historic figure alone on the basis of Bley's seminal jazz opera *Escalator Over the Hill*; Mantler, all of four-years-old, was one of the guest voices enlivening the poetry of Paul Haines, who'd earlier collaborated with Albert Ayler. (*Escalator* was first recorded over three years: 1968-71.) To this day, Mantler views the work as "part of my blood." In 1997, when Bley finally realized the work as a performance piece, Mantler served as prime mover, copyist and organizer of rehearsals. "We did a tour in the late '90s," she says. "Carla was conducting and I played most of the (keyboard) parts she'd played on the original album. I had many roles, filling in on whatever was needed." Excitedly, Mantler added that The New School may be producing the full opera this year, possibly with Arturo O' Farrill involved, who had recently commissioned a big band arrangement of Bley's final composed piece, the presciently titled "Blue Palestine" (for his new *Mundoagua: Celebrating Carla Bley* release), which includes guests Mantler and saxophonist Joe Lovano.

Well beyond the pen of Bley, Mantler has been highly active as a musician in her own right. Her connection to Brooklyn's Ghost Train Orchestra, particularly the band's 2023 album in partnership with the Kronos Quartet and a bevy of vocalists, *Songs and Symphoniques: The Music of Moondog*, includes Mantler on several cuts. "I was asked to sing," she explains, "but I never thought of myself as a singer, so I usually insist on playing harmonica too." Mantler began playing

harmonica as a child after receiving an archetypal Marine Band blues harmonica as a gift from her mother. "I was kicked out of high school band because I was subversive," she gleefully recalls, "and would sit in the stairwell by the band room every day playing this harmonica. But I realized that I couldn't hit all the notes, so Mom told me about the chromatic harmonica, like Stevie Wonder's. Since then, it's the only one I play."

Raised as a composer by a radical (Bley advised her daughter to listen to the rhythm and melody within the words to "hear" the composition as it materializes), Mantler attended the Berklee College of Music from 1985-87, during which time she secured friendships lasting decades. One such was poet-vocalist-multi instrumentalist Eric Mingus and another, bassist Jonathan Sanborn. They founded a band that included Steven Bernstein, also studying at Berklee at the same time. "As we three had famous parents, we jokingly claimed Steven was the son of Leonard." This ensemble would be seen on David Sanborn's *Night Music* television show and recorded several records for the XtraWATT label following Mantler's return to New York City. Celebrated producer Hal Willner was an early champion. "I met him when I was quite young," Mantler adds. "Hal was around Carla a lot in the early '80s, so I can remember him as being youthful and goofy, but then he ended up knowing everyone." Reminiscing on the relevance of Willner's album collections of the day, she notes his Monk tribute *That's the Way I Feel Now*, the Kurt Weill *Lost in the Stars* and the album of Disney music *Stay Awake*, among them. "Even years later," Mantler says, "Hal was doing concerts and putting together incredible bands with a lot of famous guests. Some were not that famous but were lucky enough to be included." In 2018 Willner organized a gig of Nino Rota's music to be performed at Lincoln Center Out of Doors, but it was rained out. Mantler had written an arrangement of *The Godfather* and Bley did one of 8 1/2, but this event wouldn't come to be until a 2023 concert at Roulette, following Willner's passing.

Another important Mantler colleague was British vocalist Robert Wyatt, who'd been a leader of the legendary Canterbury scene and drummer-singer with Soft Machine, Matching Mole, Centipede and others. Her keyboards and voice can be heard on Wyatt's noted 2003 album, *Cuckooland*. "I love Robert. I met him long ago and he was on my father's albums," she recalls. "I

saw him again in 2002 when I curated the Meltdown Festival in London and he invited me to the studio. My parents knew all of those Canterbury musicians." These included John Greaves and Peter Blegvad, the latter of whom Mantler recorded with, and toured with as recently as 2022. Her list of credits also range from work with her still-active trumpeter father; to singer-songwriter Robbie Dupree; Woodstock folksinger Artie Traum; to an album with stepfather, electric bassist Steve Swallow; and a stint with the Golden Palominos. She adds, "I recently did an album, released in February, with Mortelle Randonnee, a French band that champions Carla's music." A noted single from the album, "Ce maudit volcan" ("That Damn Volcano"), demonstrates the ferocity of composer Mantler, who also provides the husky, whispery vocal.

Yet it's within the confines of Mantler's own trio that she's primarily focused: Doug Wieselman (clarinet, guitar, bass) and Kato Hideki (bass) have flanked her on stage for the ten years following the 2014 release of *Business is Bad* (XtraWATT), which also featured "That Damned Volcano", albeit in a wholly different guise. The band's unclassifiable sound only begins with the genre-berating stylings of Bley. Regardless, Mantler remains a welcome haunt within the new music sphere, though, she says, "I never saw myself as a serious jazz artist. My early influences were Jack Bruce (featured on *Escalator*) and Cream, Pink Floyd (whose drummer Nick Mason collaborated with Bley) and Procol Harum. I've always leaned more to the rock and roll side." And at that, Mantler warns with a laugh.

For more info visit wattxtrawatt.com. Mantler is at Barbès Apr. 26. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Carla Bley Big Band – *Musique Mecanique* (WATT, 1978)
- Karen Mantler – *My Cat Arnold* (XtraWATT-ECM, 1988)
- Carla Bley – *The Very Big Carla Bley Band* (WATT, 1990)
- Motohiko Hino – *It's There* (Fun House-Enja, 1993)
- Carla Bley Big Band – *Goes to Church* (WATT-ECM, 1996)
- Karen Mantler – *Business is Bad* (XtraWATT-ECM, 2012)

LEST WE FORGET



CARMEN MCRAE

COMMITTED TO HER TRUTH
BY ORI DAGAN

The 105th anniversary marking the birth of the timeless genius Carmen McRae (Apr. 8, 1920–Nov. 10, 1994), who is among the most influential jazz vocalists of her generation, is being celebrated this Jazz Appreciation Month.

Born in Harlem to Jamaican immigrants, McRae studied classical piano in a home where Satchmo and Ellington's blue notes also perfumed the air. In her teens she befriended pianist-composer-bandleader, Irene Kitchings, who became her idol and primary musical inspiration (Kitchings was also married to famed jazz pianist Teddy Wilson in the '30s) and led her to Billie Holiday, whose impact was so seminal that McRae continued to pay tribute to Lady Day throughout the '80s. She frequently said that, musically speaking, "If

Billie Holiday had never existed, I probably wouldn't have, either." One of McRae's early career highlights included *Carmen McRae Sings Lover Man and Other Billie Holiday Classics* (Columbia, 1961), featuring cornetist Nat Adderley and tenor saxophonist Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis with arrangements by pianist Norman Simmons. This tribute represented a passing of the torch (even though Holiday had passed away a few years earlier in 1959), and is at once sentimental, playful, spectacularly swingin' and delivered with McRae's trademark crisp diction and blazing attitude. "I've always admired Carmen's uniqueness in that she was a master of sharing her personality and attitude about a song or just about life through her performance," says vocalist Gillian Margot, who fetes McRae at Dizzy's Club this month. "My concert is inspired by my mentor, pianist Norman Simmons (1929-2021), Carmen's musical director and accompanist from 1961-69." Margot plans to share anecdotes about McRae that Simmons shared with her.

McRae's metamorphosis from demure singer-pianist into one of the most iconic vocal artists of her time is a testament to dedication and perseverance, especially after a slow and uncertain start. Seated at the piano, in the '40s McRae sang with the Benny Carter Orchestra, then Count Basie and Mercer Ellington.

She first became a "stand-up" singer in the early '50s, performing at Minton's Playhouse and making her first recordings for Decca, Stardust and Bethlehem. It wasn't until 1954 that Milt Gabler signed her to Decca, yielding a dozen albums such as *Torchy!*, *By Special Request*, *After Glow*, *Carmen for Cool Ones* and *Boy Meets Girl*. She went on to record memorably with *The Real Ambassadors* (with Louis Armstrong, Dave Brubeck and Lambert Hendricks & Ross), as well as Dizzy Gillespie, George Shearing, Cal Tjader and other masters who adored her.

Bassist Scott Colley, who in 1986 (at age 19) toured with McRae for three years, thinks of her as "the greatest of all time." He fondly recalls McRae's sense of humor and how she brought her life experience to every lyric and what the amazing experience with her taught him the most about his role as a bassist: "I learned so much from listening to her phrasing, especially on ballads – patient, unique and so powerful. McRae would also play piano and sing a few tunes during a set. She could phrase a melody so freely with her voice while maintaining such a centered groove on the piano...Everything she played felt so good!" Another seminal album *The Great American Songbook* (Atlantic, 1971), recorded live at Donte's in

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