

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 Symphonies: 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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needs to simmer down. John Coltrane was a master of this." Yet, even the burn is nuanced. Tolliver's "Our Second Father" begins in minor blues territory but swings at 0:17 into its own suspended instant, leaving the scale, exhorting in another center, Cowell arpeggiating and Tolliver micro-trilling while the bassist and drummer abandon time but never the tune's root energy.

Reflecting on that composition, Charles muses on the symbiosis of long-fostered tradition and individual freedom, from Louis Armstrong's early 20th century innovation to his own contribution, the individual contributor bringing self to all aspects of the label over whose rich legacy the Tollivers continue stewardship. That single moment of musical shift, a viscerality sampled and held of which Charles is justly proud, parallels the space Strata-East creates for each album as statement. "We didn't make decisions in some board meeting about our responsibilities; we were responsible to no one. Each album came together as a package, without an art department to develop it."

The vision endures and like that hyphen, itself integral to what Charles calls the label's eclecticism, the Tollivers shepherd this new creative phase with intuition and enthusiasm akin to a musical moment morphing into the next, an ever-blooming vision for both cognoscenti and novitiates as yet unaware of their need for it. As Moore's notes conclude, "Is that resilient enough for you?"

For more info visit mackavenue.com/collections/strata-east. Strata-East artists performing this month include a Gil Scott-Heron tribute at Joe's Pub Apr. 1, Dick Griffin at Sistas' Place Apr. 5 and Reggie Workman at NAMA Apr. 15 and Minton's Playhouse Apr. 17. See Calendar.

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on tambourine and leaving the 750-seat audience "stompin' at the Savoy!"

There was more crowd-pleasing funk, soul and swing the next night as Lizz Wright sang an all-Gershwin program backed by the UMO Helsinki Jazz Orchestra. In her modest un-diva way, Wright explained that an evening of all standards was an interesting challenge for her, though she's performed a similar set of Jim McNeely's Gershwin arrangements with a German big band. Here's hoping she records an album of these warhorses, because they sounded wonderful in her rich, warm contralto, supported by a restrained horn section and her *simpatico* pianist of 27 years, Kenny Banks, Sr. The big band's reeds offered satin-pillowy support for "I've Got a Crush On You", then revved up for the mother of all chord changes, "I Got Rhythm", with a cheeky "Salt Peanuts" interjection and a foot-stompin' Banks solo. That charged into "Slap That Bass" from the Fred Astaire film *Shall We Dance*. First, though, Wright pointedly recited two lines of the lyrics from the dark days of 1937: "Dictators would be better off / If they zoom-zoomed now and then," adding "I'll leave that up to you to interpret." Two weeks earlier, Wright expressed her anguish about performing at the Kennedy Center the night of the presidential coup at that beloved arts institution. Her brief comment at the Savoy was the only reference to a fraught question on the minds of many Europeans at the moment: how to reconcile their love for American culture—epitomized by someone like Wright singing Gershwin—with their horror at the country's latest turns.

There were no overt politics on the festival's final night, although the performers were nearly all Americans, or at least New Yorkers, including the personnel in *Kaisa's Machine*, which included guest Mark Turner (tenor), along with Max Light (guitar), Eden Ladin (piano), Maënsivu (bass) and Peri (drums). The quintet played tunes from the just-released *Moving Parts* (Greenleaf Music), with Turner in effect standing in for the band's vibraphonist, Sasha Berliner (who was touring elsewhere). With the piano trio maintaining a relatively low-key role, Turner's cool, dry sound and presence counter-balanced Light's often-busy, flashy guitar pyrotechnics. Their instruments paralleled and entwined almost indistinguishably on the new album's closing track, "Best Kept Secrets", while the saxophonist's cerebral ECM-style playing replaced Melissa Aldana's angular saxophone on the recorded version of "Origin Story". Another guest soloist appeared for the new song "Satama (Harbor)": singer Maja Mannila, a young veteran of pianist Iiro Rantala's band as well as various R&B, soul and fusion projects. She knocked the tune out of the park with a soaring scat exploration. Ladin offered a limpid solo piano overture to "Shadow Mind", while the leader modestly shone on several supple, buttery bass spotlights.

Maënsivu introduced the festival's last headliner, guitarist Bill Frisell (who played the same venue last year with trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire). His trio set, made up of one uninterrupted instrumental jam, started tentatively with the leader seemingly suggesting various ideas to see which ones his bandmates—Thomas Morgan (bass) and Rudy Royston (drums)—would pick up on. Through much of the set, the bassist was his main sparring partner (as on their 2017 ECM duo album, *Small Town*). Morgan mostly provided subtle reinforcement, but did earn the only mid-set applause with a slow, thoughtful solo. There were overlong interludes of dozy noodling, countryish twang and trademark Frisell haze toward the start of the show. Gradually though, he began to lead the band into more energetic, skronky experimentation, bringing to mind his '80s Visiones gigs in trio with saxophonist Joe Lovano and drummer Paul Motian. Then in a spellbinding moment, he set up a tinkling loop and launched into a majestic reimagination of the Miles Davis 1969 classic, "In a

Silent Way" (composed by keyboardist Joe Zawinul), with a foreboding undercurrent matching the mood of many in the hall this dark spring.

Next year, Savoy JAZZfest will have a new artistic director, with Berlin-based guitarist Kalle Kalima taking over after Maënsivu's successful three-year stint that has been bolstered by her NYC connections. So next spring may bring a more intentional guitar focus, and likely a more European one.

For more info visit savoyteatteri.fi

(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

Los Angeles, captures the singer's humor in some hilarious song introductions (including pianist Jimmy Rowles' jazz-meets-Country Western original, "The Ballad of Thelonious Monk"). *The Carmen McRae-Betty Carter Duets* (American Music Hall, 1987) represents an endearing portrait of a beautiful friendship, both singers shining in this spontaneous meeting where the audience was perfectly rowdy. And *Carmen Sings Monk* (RCA Novus, 1988) was a highly influential vocal album of Monk masterpieces (over half the album utilizing Jon Hendricks' lyrics). She never had a million-seller but notably, she never sold out to commercialism either. Song choices were the most important to her. Her behind-the-beat phrasing often went hand-in-hand with an ironic interpretation of lyrics.

In her life, McRae struggled with racial discrimination, sexism and homophobia, not to mention the many perils of showbiz. But she was resolute and dedicated to her craft, remembered by drummer Joey Baron (who first played with the vocalist in the mid '70s) as one never to waste words, or notes. "Carmen modelled excellence and integrity every time she unapologetically graced the stage," he says. "As a musician, nobody digs as deep. I remember her out there listening and encouraging artists she deemed worthy. She was a tough but absolutely fair bandleader." Her blessing and her curse was being so completely committed to her truth.

Perhaps McRae can be summarized to an extent by bassist John Clayton, who credits her with being the first singer who forced him to listen to the meaning of a song, noting her interpretation of a lyric as nuanced and powerful. "I saw the other side of Ms. McRae, too. I remember playing in a club with her and some loud-mouth heckler shouted out, 'Hey, sing Tie a Yellow Ribbon!' Carmen, without missing a beat told him (and the whole room), 'Honey, I only sing songs about love.' SNAP! Another time, during a live club recording she sang three bars, stopped the band and asked the audience, 'Who the hell do you think you are?' We're making a live recording here and you have the NERVE to come in here and TALK?! If you want to talk, get outta here—pause—'OK boys, 1, 2, 1-2-3-4'..."

For more info visit carmenmcrae.com. A Carmen McRae tribute "For the Love of Carmen" (featuring Gillian Margot) is at Dizzy's Club Apr. 9. "The Real Ambassadors" (featuring Chris Pattishall, Chris Brubeck, Shenel Johns, Vuyo Sotash, Nicole Zuraitis, Camille Thurman, Endea Owens, Alphonso Horne, et al.) is at Appel Room Apr. 4-5 (presented by Louis Armstrong House Museum). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Carmen McRae—*By Special Request* (Decca, 1956)
- Carmen McRae—*Sings Lover Man and Other Billie Holiday Classics* (Philips/Columbia, 1961)
- Carmen McRae—*"Live" and Wailing (Woman Talk)* (Mainstream, 1965)
- Carmen McRae—*The Great American Songbook* (Atlantic, 1971)
- Carmen McRae—*At Ratso's, Vol. 1-3* (Hitchcock Media, 1976)
- Carmen McRae—*Carmen Sings Monk* (RCA Novus, 1988)