



GUNHILD CARLING

SWEDEN'S SWING QUEEN DOES IT ALL

BY JIM MOTAVALLI

Gunhild Carling began playing instruments before she could even walk – and she became transfixed by jazz at an early age. Today, she's known as "Sweden's Queen of Swing," and she is equally at ease singing as well as playing trombone, trumpet, recorder, ukulele, piano, drums, harmonica and even the bagpipes. Carling has played Carnegie Hall, worked with the WDR Big Band, held down residences at Birdland and toured with the Count Basie Orchestra under Scotty Barnhart (who described her as "one of the most important musicians and ambassadors for the arts in the world today."). She leads both big bands and small groups and is among the more energetic performers reviving the music of the Swing era. Carling also tours the world regularly as an ambassador for jazz, and her videos have gotten over 70 million views on YouTube. That was also Carling in the Swedish version of Dancing with the Stars!

THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: In addition to being Sweden's first lady of swing, you're sometimes called swing's answer to Rahsaan Roland Kirk, because, like him, you play so many different instruments.

GUNHILD CARLING: That's so true. You know, I love Rahsaan Roland Kirk. I hear a different voice and soul in every instrument, like different people. I love to find and dive deeper into the special voice of every instrument.

NYCJR: Have you heard of Rufus Harley, the only other jazz player I know to attempt the bagpipes?

CARLING: I did eventually hear of him, but he was not the reason why I started. I didn't know there was a bagpiper in jazz when I started. It was just coincidence. The first time was at a gig where I had only brought my bagpipes. The audience didn't know what to make of it—they wanted to hear jazz. But then I took off and began improvising, and it was a huge success. And since then, I have to play bagpipes in all my shows. The bagpipes are tough, with a very demanding sound. Among the antique instruments that I play, the recorder has a very lyrical, beautiful fairy-tale quality. A lot of the instruments I play are very old, from the Renaissance—including harp, trumpet and trombone.

NYCJR: Whatever instrument you play, you always seem to swing. And you certainly make the bagpipes swing too! You had music surrounding you from an early age. Did that include jazz?

CARLING: I heard all kinds of music, but not a lot of jazz at first. Maybe it's important that among the first recordings I listened to were from Billie Holiday. My parents gave me records starting when I was seven years old. So, I have been listening all my life.

NYCJR: What came first for you – playing instruments or singing?

CARLING: Both at the same time actually. Since I was a child, I've been doing the exact same thing, playing and singing New Orleans jazz. People in America often ask me why I play in a New Orleans style as a Swedish person, but this form of music has been and still is huge in Scandinavia, since the '60s. The audiences really know the artists and have heard all the essential recordings. My Swedish influences are Monica Zetterlund, Svend Asmussen, Stan Hasselgård, Jan Lundgren and Jesper Lundgaard. From the UK, there's Chris Barber, Ken Colyer and Monty Sunshine. From France, Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelli, of course.

NYCJR: All forms of jazz are pretty popular in Europe, and that was the case even during the war years, when jazz was being listened to surreptitiously. It was America's popular music then. And, of course, a lot of American jazz musicians fled to Europe in the '50s, including to Sweden, because they got a better reception there than in the US.

CARLING: We had Ben Webster in Sweden, and Dexter Gordon was nearby in Copenhagen, Denmark. Yes, a lot of American musicians lived in Europe.

NYCJR: When did you start leading your own bands?

CARLING: When I was an older teenager, or maybe around 20. It was the most natural thing to do. As a leader, I compose my own songs, and I play the classics. To challenge myself, I also play a lot of Medieval music. I say, "OK, I have these very old instruments, and now I'm going to play an ancient song." There are many types of performance. I'm interested in older music styles and entertainment forms. Vaudeville is the art of performance before jazz, and it's a beautiful art form, full of ideas and very individual for every performer. It speaks to the audience in a different way than just music. It makes the listener relax and feel good.

NYCJR: You live in California now and tour the US with a big band. Are you more comfortable working in the large band format?

CARLING: When I play in sizable theaters, for 500 people or even thousands, it's good to have a big band show. You paint with large letters in that format. For smaller clubs and an old-style 1920s Gatsby party vibe, I have a six-piece band. I have a big, big fascination and love for melodies of the 1920s, and I study them and try to learn everything by heart. One time I counted and knew 6,000 melodies by heart!

NYCJR: That must include just about all the songs in the Great American Songbook.

CARLING: Yep.

NYCJR: What do you think it is that made that period of songwriting so amazing?

CARLING: I think it's because of 78 rpm records, which allowed people to own individual songs. Professional songwriters wrote those songs—before The Beatles. Artists didn't typically compose their own material. Once the songs were written, they went to arrangers, and finally to the artists and the record companies. By 1920, with phonographs in homes, they were selling 100 million records a year in the US. Radio wasn't even a factor then. It was a golden era.

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SEPTEMBER 2026 JAZZ CALENDAR

TUESDAYS 8 -11

Weekly Jam Session with Diego Voglino and Guests

WEDNESDAYS 8 & 9:30

Dabin Ryu Trio (9/2) Fabio Gouvea Quintet (9/9)

Dezron Douglas 3Peace (9/16)

Mat Maneri MIST album release (9/23) Oscar Peñas Quartet (9/30)

THURSDAYS 8 & 9:30

Adam Kolker + Jeremy Stratton with Guests:

Marta Sanchez (9/3) Peter Kronreif (9/10)

Steve Cardenas (9/17) Chet Doxas, Jacob Sacks (9/24)

FRIDAYS 8 & 9:30

Ludovica Burtone (9/4)

Caleb Wheeler Curtis (9/11)

Jerome Sabbagh (9/18) Noah Preminger (9/25)

SATURDAYS 8 & 9:30

Mathias Jensen (9/5) Arthur Kell (9/12)

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Michael Attias BOBOLINKS 4 (9/26)

Jazz Happy Hours Thursday - Saturday, 5:30-7:30

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STEINWAY & SONS

(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

percussionist Don Alias), which recorded two albums and led off festivals in front of Jimi Hendrix and Elton John. “Jeremy was a work,” says Perla. “He was straight ahead and always played his ass off!” According to Perla, Hendrix heard their album *Energy*—recorded in 1970 with Eddie Kramer at Hendrix’ Electric Lady Studios—and wanted to jam with them once he returned from London; alas, that never came to be, as Hendrix passed away in September of that year.

Steig spent some time in Europe, concentrating on free jazz. However, his album *Firefly* (CTI, 1977) was viewed by fans there as a corporate-produced cop-out. “They thought I had sold out,” Steig said in an interview with this publication in 2004. His popularity then began to fade. “That was the start of the gigs not happening much anymore,” he continued. Pyle, who worked at Tower Records in NYC’s West Village, remembers, “Jeremy said he would market a new album as ‘the new one by the half-dead flutist,’ so more people would buy it. I always dug his dry sense of humor.” Steig would press on, continuing his fruitful collaborations with Gomez, particularly in a series of duets, from the live *Outlaws* (Enja, 1976), *Music For Flute & Double-Bass* (CMP, 1978) and *Rain Forest* (CMP, 1980), to *Lend Me Your Ears* (CMP, 1978) with Gomez and drummer Joe Chambers.

Another accident, however, curbed the flutist: in 1982, Steig was bicycling when he was hit by a car, which ran a red light, and subsequently suffered a broken neck. He was sidelined for six months and disappeared from the scene, working privately on his “flute band” projects, where he overdubbed a variety of flute parts. Steig re-emerged as a leader in 1992 on *Jigsaw* (Triloka). His productivity, though, hid his own instabilities, including the shock of 9/11. He appeared on two albums led by Gomez in 2002 and 2003, but it wasn’t until he married his wife Asako in 2003 that Steig’s life seemed to stabilize, including one fine album, *Improvised* (Steig Music, 2004), which paired his flute with guitarist Vic Juris.

Steig would perform regularly in the early aughts at the West Village Cornelia Street Café—with bassists Gomez, Cameron Brown and others. He would spend his last half-dozen years in relative anonymity, after moving with his wife to Yokohama, where he created art, wrote his musings, composed music for short animated films, and performed the occasional concert. Steig passed away due to cancer on April 13, 2016, even though news of his death was not widely circulated until almost two months after the fact.

The flutist Robert Dick, who has appeared at five of Pyle’s Howling for Jeremy Steig Solo Flute Festivals, affirms, “I play in the Howling to honor Jeremy’s inner child. I dig the wildness and freedom in his playing. He didn’t self-edit.” In an uncanny irony, Steig’s 1970 recording of “Howlin’ for Judy” (originally released on his *Legwork*, and from which the Howling Festival gets its name) was prominently sampled by the Beastie Boys on their 1994 hit “Sure Shot”. Steig noted that he made more money from its residuals than he made throughout his entire career.

For more info visit jeremysteig.info. The annual Howling for Jeremy Steig Solo Flute Festival/Jeremy Steig birthday tribute is at 6BC Botanical Garden Sep. 20 (presented by Cheryl Pyle’s Beyond Flute Group and featuring Pyle, Samantha Kochis, Sylvain Leroux, Ras Moshe Burnett, Chip Shelton and others). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Jeremy Steig—*Flute Fever* (Columbia, 1963)
- Jeremy Steig—*Wayfaring Stranger* (Blue Note, 1970)
- Jeremy Steig—*Legwork* (Solid State, 1970)
- Jeremy Steig/Eddie Gomez—*Outlaws* (Enja, 1976)
- Jeremy Steig, Eddie Gomez, Joe Chambers—*Lend Me Your Ears* (CMP, 1978)
- Jeremy Steig Quartet—*Flute on the Edge* (Steig Music, 2005)

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NYCJR: I should mention that you also dance while you play, and you did *Dancing with the Stars* in Sweden. How did you do on the show?

CARLING: It was mostly celebrities on that show. But one year it was raining all day, every day, and nobody went out the whole summer. And I had a gig in Stockholm’s Central Park. And suddenly, when my show started the sun came out, the doors opened and the whole city saw me. The next year I did an even bigger show with my New Orleans group, playing songs like “Bourbon Street Parade”. And that’s when they called me and said I should be on *Dancing with the Stars*. I had to learn different styles—this was ballroom dancing, and I tap dance and do the Lindy Hop. Ballroom dancing is much more stiff, totally different. The competition was difficult, but I made it to third place.

NYCJR: I know you played both with the WDR Big Band in Germany and also with the Count Basie Orchestra, under Scotty Barnhart.

CARLING: That was fantastic. I played with the Basie Orchestra in London, and then two shows in Sweden, where it was winter, snowing and freezing. Then we went to Germany and everywhere. The audiences, they just love the Basie band so much. There was a lot of pride from the Europeans that I was one of them and in that band. And the musicians in that band are SO good. It was the time of my life, and a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

NYCJR: In 2018 you relocated to California. What led to that?

CARLING: Two things. I was invited to do a tour with Postmodern Jukebox [a rotating musical collective that plays contemporary music in the style of the ’20s] in America, and that was really a dream that I wanted to do. They play in every city, and I wanted to see every city. And I also wanted to be a part of the Postmodern Jukebox world, and work with them in Europe. My husband found a job in America, in San Francisco, and so we moved there.

NYCJR: And then came COVID-19.

CARLING: I was in California, and we couldn’t travel. We couldn’t even leave the house. So, I started a jazz band with my neighbors, and we started to livestream. It was the best thing, working with young musicians from all over the world. We started with “Tin Roof Blues”, by the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, and we explored the Louis Armstrong Hot Fives and the music of Fletcher Henderson, on to Kansas City with Bennie Moten, and then Chicago jazz.

NYCJR: Do you like the caliber of the jazz musicians you find in America?

CARLING: Very, very good. In Europe we fell in love with jazz through records, and we see it as like the classical music of the 20th century. It’s more free in America. You can mix and match as you like.

NYCJR: And what do you have coming up?

CARLING: I’m doing a Louis Armstrong record, a tribute with the big band, strings and guests, and all of Satchmo’s highlights, from “Cornet Chop Suey” to “La Vie En Rose” and beyond. And then a tour. In September I play at The Loft at City Winery in New York and Boston’s City Winery. I will also play Keystone Korner in Baltimore, and Centenary University in Hackettstown, NJ [on Aug. 30, Carling also plays the Nyack Jazz Festival in Nyack, NY].

NYCJR: I was wondering if you’ve ever played NYC’s Gotham Jazz Festival, which is all about ’20s and ’30s jazz music. It just seems made for you.

CARLING: Oh, it’s definitely made for me! I haven’t been yet, but one day. I was invited, but right then I couldn’t go because of my visa status. My residency in NYC has always been Birdland, the jazz club that’s my favorite place to play.

NYCJR: Watching you, I’m reminded that Louis Armstrong and Count Basie were great musicians, but they were also entertainers.

CARLING: When people go out on a Friday or Saturday night, it’s a special time and the energy has to be there. But if they go out on a Monday, it’s different. You can slow it down, play these songs and talk about the music. If it’s a Friday night, though, you have to give blood, sweat and tears!

For more info visit gunhildcarling.net. Carling is at The Loft at City Winery Sep. 16. She is also at Sellersville Theater (Sellersville, PA) Sep. 10 and Centenary Stage Company (Hackettstown, NJ) Sep. 12. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.

Recommended Listening:

- Gunhild Carling Band—*I Lost My Heart in Dixieland* (Phontastic, 1984)
- Gunhild Carling and Her Swing Band—*That’s My Desire* (Heptown, 2002)
- Carling Family—*Hot Jazz* (Heptown, 2008)
- Gunhild Carling & Carling Big Band—*Variete* (Carling, 2012-13)
- Gunhild Carling—*Good Evening Cats!* (Jazz Art, 2022)
- Gunhild Carling—*Jazz is My Lifestyle* (Jazz Art, 2024)



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