



The Art of Vocalese
Janis Siegel (Origin)
Alto Madness
Amy London (FiveCat)
by Marilyn Lester

Vocalese—setting lyrics to jazz instrumentals—has a long but intermittent history. Duke Ellington himself tried it with his 1940 “Cotton Tail”, but vocalese only really gained traction with the 1957 formation of Lambert, Hendricks and Ross (LHR), with ace lyricist Jon Hendricks (who set “Cotton Tail”) becoming the pinnacle of the art. So when Janis Siegel cofounded the Manhattan Transfer (1969) and Amy London formed The Royal Bopsters (2012), could Siegel’s *The Art of Vocalese* and London’s *Alto Madness* be far behind?

The nine-track *The Art of Vocalese* is largely an homage to Siegel’s mentor, Hendricks. The songbook classic “Bye Bye Blackbird”, as reimagined by Hendricks and Miles Davis, is here a gentle swinger that features guest vocalist Raúl Midón, who offers a vocal trumpet solo in the middle section. “In the Presence and Absence of Each Other”, by Claus Ogerman and Michael Brecker and lyricized by Siegel, begins with vocal harmony, then yields to Siegel and tenor saxophonist Wayne Escoffery; percussionist Bobby Sanabria provides a compelling Latin underpinning. For outright fun, Dave Brubeck’s “Unsquare Dance”, with lyrics by the versatile Larry Kerchner, is

performed in a brisk 7/4 time, with an occasional piano riff and a stream of handclaps and hand percussion throughout. Vocals are by Siegel and Lauren Kinhan. Also rhythmically pulsing is the calypso-adjacent Charlie Parker tune, “Barbados”. This foot-tapper is supported by John DiMartino (piano), Lonnie Plaxico (bass) and Vince Cherico (drums). Count Basie gets a hat tip with “Down for Double”, and “It’s Sand, Man” is also a tribute: to dancer Sandman Sims as well as to LHR, who recorded it on their first album in 1957. Siegel takes the lead vocal, with harmonies by Kinhan and original Manhattan Transfer member Laurel Massé. *The Art of Vocalese* also offers vocals from Lea DeLaria and additional musical support from guitarists Frank Vignola and Ed Cherry.

Amy London’s *Alto Madness* features seven songs by Benny Carter and four more written by alto players. London wrote new vocalese passages for three of these tracks: “New York Afternoon”, “How Can You Lose?” and “You Blew Out the Flame in My Heart”. The band—Mike Hashim (alto, tenor), Janice Friedman (piano), Mark McCarron (guitar), Ralph Hamperian (bass), Mike Campenni (drums)—offers solid support, with Ron Horton (trumpet, flugelhorn) present on eight of the album’s tunes. Opener “New York Afternoon”, with Eddie Jefferson’s lyrics supplemented by London’s, features backup from The Royal Bopsters in their only album appearance. Upbeat and percussively driven, the track makes an effective start to the whole—a pleasant exploration of a rhythmically diverse collection with tunes that include standards such as “I’m Glad There Is You”, “Only Trust Your Heart”, “A Kiss from You” and the great Johnny Hodges’ “You Blew Out the Flame in My Heart”, with lyrics by the oft-underrated Ervin Drake.

Both albums are fine tributes to the rarefied art of

vocalese; they are destined to be savored by listeners who crave for more, please.

For more info visit originarts.com and newworldn jazz.com. Siegel’s album release concert is at Dizzy’s Club Nov. 4. London and Siegel are at Dizzy’s Club Nov. 17 (part of a tribute to Sheila Jordan). See Calendar.



American Crow
Maria Schneider Orchestra (ArtistShare)
by George Kanzler

The first half of Maria Schneider’s *American Crow* is the title piece, an engaging, sometimes ravishing, concerto for trumpet (Mike Rodriguez) and jazz orchestra, firmly in the vein of Gil Evans’ collaborations with Miles Davis. Schneider has a marvelous command of the rich textures and harmonic vocabulary developed by Evans (she was for a time his assistant). But around the seventh minute, the ensemble reveals an anxious, tense energy; Rodriguez’ solo skitters off the plangent curve it had been following, emitting frissons of fear and doubt. Things are falling apart musically as is the intent, and then, very convincingly, order is restored and the piece ends as it began. The alternate take that closes out this EP, “American Crow Revisited” begins

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