

## KARRIN ALLYSON ADDS VOICE TO JAZZ CLASSICS

by Rashod D. Ollison

Music Notes

03/16/06



She was sharp in heels and black leather pants that hugged her curves. The haircut was sassy: golden blond, cut in layers, tapered in the back. As the band kicked into a bluesy groove, she closed her eyes, moaned into the microphone and patted her rocking hips in time with the beat.

That was about four years ago at the Blue Note in New York. And Karrin Allyson, one of the best vocalists working in jazz today, was on that night, delivering subtle blues numbers, airy ballads and Brazilian love songs. She was promoting *In Blue*, a set of mood-indigo songs.

Since that show, which I glowingly reviewed for a New York paper, I've picked up several of her albums. And loved them. I always look forward to what Karrin flips next.

I interviewed her when her last album came out: 2004's pleasing *Wild For You*, a collection of '70s pop tunes (Roberta Flack's "Feel Like Making Love," Cat Stevens' "Wild World," Carole King's "It's Too Late") steeped and filtered through a jazz sensibility.

Karrin's new album is *Footprints*, and it's her 10th release for Concord in 12 years. The 13-cut set is yet another strong CD: stylish, consistent, thoughtful and soulful.

"Footprints is several things," says the Kansas native, who's calling from her father's house in Omaha, Neb. "These are the great jazz instrumentals of the '50s and '60s with new lyrics."

The artist, who plays Washington's Kennedy Center for Performing Arts tomorrow night, worked with lyricist Chris Caswell to put words to classic instrumentals by Dizzy Gillespie ("Con Alma"), Nat Adderley ("Never Say Yes"), John Coltrane ("Lazy Bird") and others. She also collaborated with vocalese legend Jon Hendricks and singer Nancy King.

"It was almost like doing the Ballads album," Karrin says, referring to her stellar 2001 set on which she re-interpreted Coltrane's much-debated 1962 LP of the same name. "It was like trying to get the phrasing right, not emulating Trane's phrasing, but singing the songs with a deep spirituality. I wanted to do that on this album."

Footprints isn't as transcendent as Ballads. It's not as adventurous, either. But it's still a solid effort - refined and smartly executed. Her trio - Bruce Barth on piano, Peter Washington on bass, Todd Strait on drums - is warmly supportive throughout. Karrin's vocals anchor the album. She has a laid-back, straight-no-chaser style that, at times, recalls Carmen McRae sans the vinegar. Fluid, graceful, spring breeze-light, her voice has a bit of dusk in it, an appealing rasp.

With vocalists, we can improvise with phrasing or scat sing," Karrin says. "Those are challenging things to do, but it's worth it."

She and King trade riffs on "All You Need to Say," a vocal rendering of Adderley's "Never Say Yes," one of the album's highlights. The singers complement each other: Both have lissome approaches with a little grit in the sound. On "Strollin'," Karrin shares the mike with Hendricks. Though his voice has lost much of its power, the jazz vet is still charismatic.

"You want to make sure you do the songs justice," Karrin says, "and capture the meaning of these iconic songs and capture the mood of the tune. You have to choose carefully what you want to convey to the listener."

My favorite track on Footprints is the first one: the shimmering "Something Worth Waiting For (Con Alma)." The feel is bittersweet yet hopeful:

Dreams shared  
Souls bared  
Wishing on stars above  
Words left unsaid  
Tears shed  
Could I be lost in love?

Karrin says, "The songs represent nicely what the album is all about - looking backward and forward musically."

And the trip is simply beautiful.