



KARRIN ALLYSON

Biography

Few American jazz singers have had as long and fruitful a relationship with Brazilian music as **Karrin Allyson**. Her early albums included such classics as “Corcovado” and “One Note Samba”; her 1999 recording *From Paris to Rio* split the difference between songs from those musical cities; 2008’s *Imagina: Songs of Brazil* upped the ante on Rio, and now here’s another all-Brazilian outing, *A Kiss for Brazil*, featuring the great Bahian singer-guitarist **Rosa Passos** on two songs.

What’s remarkable about Allyson’s ongoing foray into these sounds is she has never recorded the same song twice. Glancing at the song list for *A Kiss for Brazil*, which includes Luiz Bonfá’s “Manhã de Carnaval” and Antonio Carlos Jobim’s “Wave,” you may wonder why it has taken her so long to get to those oft-performed gems. The answer, for starters, is that there’s a bottomless pool of great Brazilian songs to record. And as you may have noticed, Allyson has had a lot else going on as one of jazz’s most popular and wide-ranging vocalists.

Nominated for five Grammys, she has delved into bop and blues, pop and Great American standards, and written her own songs. Her highly regarded 2001 album *Ballads: Remembering John Coltrane* was a beautiful rendering of the songs on Trane’s 1963 classic, plus three other numbers associated with him. Her 2004 album, *Wild for You*, is a collection of singer-songwriter pop tunes—“my first love”—by the likes of Joni Mitchell, Cat Stevens, Carole King, and Carly Simon. On 2015’s *Many a New Day*, she paid tribute to Rodgers and Hammerstein in the distinguished company of pianist Kenny Barron.

More recently, she was the star of the ambitious 2019 concept recording, *Shoulder to Shoulder: Centennial Tribute to Women’s Suffrage*, a collection of songs of the Suffragist Era (plus two of hers) featuring the stellar rhythm section of Helen Sung, Endea Owens, and Allison Miller and Ingrid Jensen on trumpet as well as contributions by Regina Carter, the late Harry Belafonte, Madeleine Peyroux, Veronica Swift, and Kurt Elling. Produced and conceived by Kabir Sehgal and John Daversa (*American Dreamers: Voices of Hope, Music of Freedom*), the project was bound for Broadway before being canceled by Covid.

Having subsequently written and recorded two dreamy pop-style singles, “**Falling Up**” and “**Just Passin’ Through**,” she had the idea of recording two more with Passos when she heard her friend was coming to New York, where Allyson has lived for nearly 25 years. “I didn’t have a label at the time,” she says. “I didn’t know what I was going to do with the recordings; maybe they would just be for posterity. I just knew I had to document the music.”

With the help of Passos’s drummer, **Rafael Barata**, who before joining her band had accompanied Allyson years ago in Rio, Allyson reached Rosa through What’s App—“That’s how she rolls”—and the session became a reality. It was the first time Allyson had recorded with an all-Brazilian band (along with veteran American bassist **Harvie S**), which proved a real game changer. Things went so well with the two songs, Jobim’s “**O Grande Amor**” and “**Month of March in Salvador**,” co-written by Passos and Allyson, there was no stopping there.

Allyson hadn't planned on recording another all-Brazilian album and *A Kiss for Brazil* was not intended to be a "deep dive" into Brazilian music—more an act of affection for what it has given her and the world. Backed by Barata, S, **Vitor Gonçalves** on piano, electric piano, and accordion, and **Yotam Silberstein** on guitar, she springs a pair of surprises with "**The Gift (Recado Bossa Nova)**," a song she hadn't previously known that was recorded by Eydie Gormé in 1963, and Benny Carter's "**Only Trust Your Heart**," an American classic performed as an album-ending duet by Allyson and S.

A Kiss for Brazil also includes Jobim's "**Antigua**" and songs by other Brazilian notables including Djavan ("**Flor de Lis**"), Ivan Lins ("**The Island**"), and Sergio Mendes ("**So Many Stars**"), with lyrics by Alan and Marilyn Bergman on the latter two tunes. "This music is just so transporting," Allyson says. "It contains so much beauty. We're hopeful we can bring more people into this world and share its sense of hope."

Karrin Allyson was born into an activist liberal family on July 27, 1962 in Great Bend, Kansas. Her father was a Lutheran minister who loved country music. Her mother was a classical music teacher who gave young Karrin her first music lessons. When Karrin was five, her family moved from Kansas City to Omaha, Nebraska, where a music teacher who practiced the Robert Pace method, well ahead of his time, opened her up to the possibilities of improvising beyond strict chord changes.

While attending the University of Nebraska Omaha on a classical music scholarship, Allyson made some coin as lead singer of the all-girl rock band **Tomboy**. She also performed at a local piano bar, mostly offering singer-songwriter material. "Had Ms. Allyson followed a different path, she might have enjoyed a pop career along the lines of Bonnie Raitt's or Shawn Colvin's," a *New York Times* critic would write, reviewing a show following the release of *Wild for You*.

"Being in a rock band gave me a lot of performance experience that I benefited from," she says. "I learned how to move on stage, among other things."

Allyson was first drawn into Brazilian music in the 1990s by guitarist and Sergio Mendes alumnus **Danny Embrey**, who was then playing in Kansas City in a band called Sons of Brasil. "I fell in love with Brazilian music, I became a sponge for it," she says. "I started singing French music too, which I was more fluent in with my minor in French. But Brazilian singers like Elis Regina and Ivan Lins captured me and never let me go."

Allyson's recordings have been as varied as they are consistent. She made her debut in 1993 with *I Didn't Know About You*, which Embrey, a frequent collaborator, co-produced and co-arranged. Her first of more than a dozen efforts for Concord, it included Jobim's "Insensatez" (as part of a medley) as well as songs by Duke Ellington, the Gershwins, Gerry Mulligan, Randy Newman, and Janis Ian.

Ballads: Remembering John Coltrane, featuring pianist James Williams, raised the bar with its lovely, affecting treatments. (Surprisingly, the most played song from the album on Spotify, with more than two million hits, is "Too Young to Go Steady," a '60s staple for heartthrobs Tommy Sands, Connie Stevens, and James Darren. Any clues why? "I have no idea!" Allyson says, laughing. "Maybe it's because of Steve Wilson! He's just like a bird when he plays!")

2002's *In Blue*, featuring pianist Mulgrew Miller, ranges from Bobby Timmons's "Moanin'" to Joni Mitchell's "Blue Motel Room" to Mose Allison's "Everybody's Cryin' Mercy"—an inevitable meeting of Allyson and Allison! Her other fan favorites include 2006's *Footprints*, featuring Jon Hendricks and Allyson's Portland singing partner Nancy King. On the album, Allyson and Los Angeles lyricist Chris Caswell fashioned vocal treatments of bop classics including Dizzy Gillespie's "Con Alma," John

Coltrane's "Ladybird," and Wayne Shorter's "Footprints." She also covers two songs by another hero, Oscar Brown, Jr.

Allyson and her longtime partner **Bill McGlaughlin** (with whom she co-hosts the webcast "B&K Café" on New Jersey Public Radio) met in Kansas City, where he conducted the Kansas City Symphony. A big jazz fan, he has, she said, been an invaluable "sounding board" for her. When he left the symphony, they decided they were going to make a move. Chicago (where prized station WFMT airs McGlaughlin's program "Exploring Music") was a possibility, but they decided on New York. "I had always dreamt about it," Allyson says.

Still, she says, "I am a Midwesterner at heart," which helps explain her unassuming, clear-toned, deceptively sophisticated style. "She brings a timbre that is part ice and part grain—incisive, original, and emotionally convincing," wrote leading critic Gary Giddins.

Awarded an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree from her alma mater, Allyson has imparted the value of natural singing styles as an instructor—she currently teaches at the Jackie McLean Institute of Music at the Hartt School in Connecticut and William Paterson University in New Jersey. "Some professors have students transcribe Miles Davis and copy what he did. That's not the way I roll. I feel like it should be coming from who you are. People are interested in hearing your personal take on a song."

Her beautiful versions of "**Manhã de Carnaval**" and "**Wave**" on *A Kiss for Brazil* certainly live up to that standard. Of the latter song, she says, "I had sung it so often and heard it so often, it was like, I can't do it. But recording with a Brazilian group for the first time, it was a new experience. They harkened back to Jobim's first vibe with that tune. It's a groover. I learned so much from them."

A song that speaks even more deeply to her is "**Month of March in Salvador**." "I'm a nature girl," she says. "I love watching birds and other natural wonders. This speaks to my love of the environment." Even as a diehard New Yorker, "A cricket sings and I feel life all inside me . . ." This love of Nature and its connection to music only enrich her own winning vocal approach. •

Karrin Allyson: *A Kiss for Brazil*

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