

LORI CARSILO: A LIFE IN MUSIC (1,050 words)

San Francisco jazz singer Lori Carsillo is best known for her revelatory work interpreting the Great American Songbook with an incisive but emotionally restrained sensibility. But her muse has led her in many different directions, and on or off the bandstand music flows through her every endeavor.

Since releasing the first of her four albums on her label Tru Blu Lu Records, Carsillo (pronounced "car-SILL-oh") has forged enduring ties with some of the region's most accomplished improvisers. Guitarist Dave Mac Nab's sinewy lines serve as a lyrical foil on her impressive 2002 debut album *Bittersweet*, which also features the superb rhythm section tandem of drummer Jason Lewis and the late, lamented bassist John Shifflett.

Featuring elegant arrangements by Mac Nab (who also produced the album), Carsillo's critically hailed follow up, 2004's *Cole Porter...Old Love, New Love, True Love*, cemented her reputation as a thoughtful song stylist with an excellent ear for material ideally suited for her clear, unaffected vocals.

By the time she recorded 2014's *Sugar and Smoke*, Carsillo had expanded her repertoire to encompass Bacharach and David, Alan and Marilyn Bergman, and Bob Dorough. With pianist Adam Shulman, the accompanist of choice for brilliant song stylists like Paula West and Ed Reed, she found another ideal arranger and interlocutor. Her latest album, 2018's *A Dream or Two* is a lithe pianoless session that accentuates the deliberate emotional calibration of her approach.

Part of what makes her such a fascinating artist is that she's never been interested in sticking to the straight ahead path. In 2017, she was featured in the jazz play *The Cool* which ran for three sold-out weeks in San Francisco's Mission District. She released a lovely children's album, *Lullabies for Little Dreamers*, and two CDs with the Theremin-powered Project: Pimento, which turns familiar songs into an uncanny retro-space-age soundtrack.

Fascinated by the possibilities of multimedia productions, she delved into music videos, creating pieces for her original material, some in collaboration with Dollars & Donuts Productions. Since producing her own video for the song "Out of the Blue," a piece she co-wrote with veteran guitarist Jeffrey Burr, she's thrown herself into various projects, like singing "Baby, It's Cold Outside" for a short Dollars & Donuts-produced film *Shadows in the Snow*.

In many ways Carsillo was weaned on music. Her mother is an accomplished vocalist and pianist who started teaching her daughters at home (Carsillo's older sister is a professional violinist). Immersed in the arts, her family supported her passion for music, and as a shy but eager-to-shine kid she took advantage of any opportunity to sing in public.

At home, she put her parents' treasure trove of LPs to good use. "We had a lot of Ella," she recalls. "I'd listen and write down the lyrics and try to learn the songs. People would make me tapes and I'd study them. The first ones were Julie London and Peggy Lee."

She'd caught the jazz bug and continued her self-styled studies listening to recordings by inimitable song stylists as well as instrumentalists such as Miles Davis, Bill Evans, and Dave Brubeck. Determined to find outlets for performing she became the first vocalist featured with Frank Moura's award-winning Menlo-Atherton High School Jazz Band. She made her debut with the ensemble opening for Carmen McRae, Tuck & Patti, and the Yellowjackets at the Palo Alto Jazz Festival. The band worked regularly and performed at major festivals around Europe.

At Oregon's Lewis & Clark College Carsillo studied bel canto and sang around Portland with the school's jazz big band, once again carving out space in an ensemble that didn't usually include a vocalist. Back in the Bay Area, she threw herself into the art form, studying jazz vocals with Kitty Margolis and Baomi Butts-Bhanji, who introduced her to the music of Blossom Dearie.

"I still take a lot of songs from Blossom's repertoire," Carsillo says. "I would hear tunes that I couldn't get out of my head." In those early days, she gained indispensable experience performing with the veterans on the jazz scene, "Most everyone was so supportive and I essentially got on-the-job training from all these local greats."

Gigging around the region, she connected with a stellar group of young musicians, including Mac Nab, Shifflett, Lewis, pianist Michael Bluestein, and saxophonist Eric Crystal. "Dave Mac Nab was the first player I worked with and we started getting a groove going," Carsillo says. "When I started working with him I felt I should do an album."

Her debut album *Bittersweet* introduced Carsillo's less-is-more sound, an approach championed by legendary educator, producer, and record label owner Herb Wong, who wrote the album's liner notes. She celebrated the CD's release at the storied Oakland jazz club Yoshi's, and a return engagement inspired a thematic concert focusing on the music of Cole Porter. The concert led to Carsillo's second album, which features Mac Nab's guitar and arrangements with bassist Devon Hoff, drummer Alan U'Ren, and trombonist Jeff Cressman.

With 2018's ballad-centric *A Dream or Two*, Carsillo introduced a new cast of collaborators, working closely with guitarist Jeffrey Burr, bassist Eric Markowitz, drummer James Gallagher, and trumpet master Erik Jekabson. A vital part on the Bay Area jazz scene and regular presence in New Mexico, she's performed at SFJAZZ, Yoshi's, the Fillmore Jazz Festival, Bimbo's, and The Outpost in Albuquerque. While she makes a concert hall feel like a living room, Carsillo can usually be found casting a spell in intimate Bay Area venues like Café Claude, Bird & Beckett, Club Deluxe, Savanna Jazz, Black Cat, Beach Chalet, and the Sound Room.

Even when it seems like she's revealing hidden truths, Carsillo has many more facets to explore. She continues to pursue songwriting, often collaborating with Jeffrey Burr. She's studying piano for pleasure and to expand her compositional toolkit, and she's exploring theatrical situations.

"I've always loved acting, that was an early ambition," she says. "I feel as if there's so much potential, particularly getting more jazz into theater like with the Chet Baker play *The Cool*. It's why I love working on music videos."

A master storyteller with no shortage of new tales to tell, Carsillo continues to extend her creative purview. She's a jazz artist with a restless streak, eager to discover what comes next.