

Allyson Makes Rodgers & Hammerstein Swing

Many a jazz vocalist has interpreted the songs Richard Rodgers composed in collaboration with Lorenz Hart, which produced standards like “My Funny Valentine,” “Lover” and “Have You Met Miss Jones.” But when singer-pianist Karrin Allyson and Motéma Music President Jana Herzen recently tried to identify a jazz vocalist who had recorded an entire album of the masterworks Rodgers wrote with his second major writing partner, Oscar Hammerstein II, they came up empty.

That distinction now belongs to Allyson, whose Motéma debut album, *Many A New Day* (*Karrin Allyson Sings Rodgers & Hammerstein*), is a full-fledged collaboration between the singer and the dream-team duo of Kenny Barron on piano and John Patitucci on upright bass. They tackled familiar songs like “Oh, What A Beautiful Mornin’” (*Oklahoma*), “Happy Talk” (*South Pacific*) and “Hello Young Lovers” (*The King and I*), but also the gorgeously melodic “Something Good” (from *The Sound of Music*). The album was co-produced by Allyson and Michael Leonhart (Donald Fagen, Mark Ronson/Bruno Mars).

Allyson may be the perfect singer to reinterpret Rodgers & Hammerstein for a modern, jazz-aware audience: It’s the combination of her Midwestern girl-next-door sincerity (she was born in Great Bend, Kansas); her emotional availability, which lets her fully inhabit the great Hammerstein lyrics; and the refined jazz sensibility that lets her explore the possibilities of swing inherent in a great Rodgers melody.

Through more than a dozen albums, most of them on Concord, Allyson has sung everything from American Songbook classics to vocalese versions of Bobby Timmons’ “Moanin’” and Wayne Shorter’s “Footprints.”

DownBeat spoke to Allyson at her Upper West Side apartment in New York City.

Why did you want to record an album of Rodgers & Hammerstein tunes?

It just seemed like it was time. I was watching a PBS *American Masters* documentary about Oscar Hammerstein. I was struck by how principled he was, how he infused his songs with his beliefs, and how he stood up for things that weren’t so popular in the McCarthy era. I love Hart’s lyrics, too, but the Hammerstein lyrics speak to me more.

In high school, you were cast as Nelly Forbush, the lead character in *South Pacific*, a show that broke ground in musical theater by addressing racial prejudice.

I was thrilled to play Nelly. In our high school version [at Holy Names High School in Oakland, California], it was doubly poignant for the audience, because the actor who played [the male lead] Emile de Becque was an African-American guy, and here I’m a white girl, and we kissed on stage—it was a big deal! Oddly enough, my then-boyfriend was black, but Emile was gay [laughs]. We were all friends, so it didn’t matter.

Karrin Allyson has recorded an album of Rodgers & Hammerstein songs.



INGRID HERTFELDER

Why did you decide to record the new album with just piano and bass?

I’ve long been a fan of Kenny Barron; his playing is so elegant and soulful—exactly what I wanted for this project. I originally thought of doing it with just Kenny. But Kenny wanted a bass player, and I had worked with John before on my CD *Ballads: Remembering John Coltrane*. I had two rehearsals here in my apartment with Kenny, then one with both Kenny and John. We tried not to over-rehearse or do anything to death. If we didn’t like a [version], Kenny would say, “Hey, it’s jazz. Let’s move on.” Then we recorded the whole project in two days.

How did you select the songs and come up with the arrangements?

I investigated verses to songs. I sat at the piano with songbooks. ... I did all the arrangements; then Michael [Leonhart] helped me tweak them.

I sketched them out, but once you get people like Kenny Barron and John Patitucci in there, they make them better than you can ever imagine. On “Surrey With The Fringe On Top,” it was not my idea to do the verse—it was Kenny’s. I suggested he play it, just instrumentally, up front. It came out so beautifully; that’s what clinched it for me. There’s also that half-step [modulation] thing in the verse that keeps going up—that was my deal.

Rodgers was well-known for his disdain of “creative” interpretations of his songs, yet they have inspired countless jazz versions. If he were still around, what would you say to him about your interpretation of his work?

I’d say, ‘I sure hope I did it right’ [laughs]. I would hope that he would have liked it.

—Allen Morrison