

Back In The Studio, Catherine Russell Makes Everything Old New Again

By Allen Morrison

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Outside MSR Studios in midtown Manhattan on a recent Tuesday afternoon in December, a chilly rain was falling. Inside, cozily ensconced in a wood and glass-paneled vocal booth in Studio A, the singer Catherine Russell was sipping coffee from a cardboard cup. She checked her smartphone while, on the main floor of the spacious tracking room, a 10-piece band prepared for another take on a classic Dinah Washington tune called “Let Me Be The First To Know.”

Russell was well into the second of three days of recording for a new album, tentatively titled *Harlem On My Mind*, to be released by summer 2016. The record follows the critical and commercial success of 2014’s *Bring It Back* (Jazz Village/Harmonia Mundi), the most played vocal release of 2014 on jazz radio, according to Jazz Week. On that album, the historically minded Russell took jazz, blues and R&B songs from the 1920s to the 1950s - encompassing the Jazz Age, Swing Era, and Rhythm & Blues era - and re-invigorated them, singing them with so much joy and lusty emotion as to make them sound, if not quite “modern,” new again.

Working with her manager Paul Kahn and engineer Katherine Miller, Russell once again enlisted composer/arranger/tenor saxophonist Andy Farber to arrange and conduct. The compact, ultra-tight orchestra included some of the finest players in New York’s revived traditional jazz scene - trumpeters Jon-Erik Kellso and Alphonso

Horne, trombonist John Allred, and a tenor sax section consisting of Dan Block, Mark Lopeman, and Farber, complementing the rhythm section of Matt Munisteri, guitar, Mark Shane, piano, Tal Ronen, bass and Mark McLean, drums.

They recorded a total of 18 songs over the three days. Besides “Let Me Be The First To Know,” the ones most likely to make the final album, according to Kahn, are “You’re My Thrill,” “Don’t Take Your Love From Me,” the Clarence Williams blues classic “You’ve Got The Right Key (But The Wrong Keyhole),” and the title tune, “Harlem On My Mind,” a typically witty Irving Berlin tune made famous by Ethel Waters.

This afternoon, Russell was up to take four of the Dinah Washington ballad. Each take was a little different, but all were virtually flawless - a natural result of her 30 years in the business, including singing backup for Paul Simon, Steely Dan, Cyndi Lauper and David Bowie, before she finally recorded her first solo album in 2006. Most striking was that each take sounded as fresh and emotionally present as the first one.

Russell curates great songs, some well-known, some obscure. “Lyrically, it has to be a good story,” she said by phone a few days later. “I like old fashioned romance.” Her selections are very personal, she says, because this is music she grew up with as the child of Luis Russell, the legendary bandleader and Louis Armstrong collaborator, and bassist/singer Carline Ray, an original member of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm. Armstrong, Dinah Washington, Billie Holiday, and Frank Sinatra were big influences. “I used to go see Alberta Hunter at the Cookery, as well as Ruth Brown, because my mother played bass with her during the 1980s. Those ladies inspired me as to how to put my show together, and how to mix jazz and blues.

“To me, their music never gets old. I always feel like they’re speaking to me, like there’s a personal need for them to tell the story they’re telling through these songs. They gave everything emotionally to their audiences. That’s what I want to do; it’s what I want to give to the people who come to my shows.”

It’s no small thing to recreate music of another era in a way that speaks to people of this era, said engineer Miller. “All the kids love her,” Miller said. “When I go to her gigs, I see a wide range of ages. Sometimes there are people who might not normally be interested in jazz, people who are in their 20s and really like her. She’s somebody who is modern even though her material is not.”