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## Shiri Zorn Finds Her Voice

AS BIRTHDAY PRESENTS FOR JAZZ MUSICIANS go, it was a good one. Shiri Zorn, an Israeli-born jazz vocalist who lives and performs in Saratoga Springs, New York, about 30 miles north of the state capital, is an ardent fan of the much-admired singer Tierney Sutton. She sometimes fantasized about meeting her, maybe even taking a lesson from her, but it seemed far-fetched.

"She's been my idol for 15 years now," she said by phone from her home. "[Guitarist] George Muscatello knew that because I've been talking about her for years. And he just went behind my back and contacted her."

Muscatello secretly wrote to ask Sutton if she would give his partner a lesson, as a surprise for her 40th birthday. Not only did Sutton agree to give her a lesson, she took Zorn on as a regular student. Ultimately, she was so enamored with the Israeli-American singer that she offered to

fly to Saratoga from California to co-produce her debut album, *Into Another Land* (CD Baby).

"Shiri is my favorite kind of singer (and human, for that matter) — open-minded, creative and honest," Sutton wrote in an email. "She has enough confidence to look at her own work and fine-tune it. ... She has a wonderful, detached, honest idea of who she is, what she wanted to work on and how I could help her."

Zorn's voice is cool, calm and cerebral, her tone pure. She articulates lyrics with perfect diction and scalpel-like precision. She has found the perfect setting for her gem-like voice in an unusual trio with Muscatello's spare, ghostly tones and the simmering Brazilian beats of percussion master Mauricio Zottarelli.

On an album of quirky originals and meditative, one-of-a-kind renditions of songs like "How Deep Is The Ocean" and Jobim's "Zingaro," they

create a tiny, hermetically sealed world of sound and sensation.

Zorn's scrupulous diction is one of the first things that strikes you when you talk to her. Then you learn that, in addition to singing, she is a language teacher at Skidmore College in Saratoga, teaching undergrads Hebrew, the language she grew up speaking in Israel near Tel Aviv.

"My name means sing in Hebrew, the command form of the word," she said. "I don't know how my parents knew, but they did." She enrolled in Israel's famous Thelma Yellin High School for the Arts, which has spawned such noted jazz stars as Anat Cohen, her brothers Avishai and Yuval, and Gilad Hekselman.

Zorn studied classical voice at Guildhall School of Music in London. "Towards the end of my undergrad studies, a light bulb went off, and I realized that my voice just did not belong in classical music anymore. I found myself listening to other styles, starting with singers who had a connection to classical. The first was Sarah Vaughan, who, in her later years, had this vibrato that almost sounds operatic.

"I never improvised a note before I was 26. I started out as your very square classical musician who has to have everything on the page to be able to make music. All of a sudden, I'm standing in front of a jazz singing teacher. And she says, 'Just sing!' [laughs] And I say, 'What do you mean? Sing what?' That's when this long quest began."

The fact that Zorn's bass-less trio on *Into Another Land* sounds like a complete band is largely due to the ingenuity of guitarist/arranger Muscatello and the synergy he achieves with Zottarelli's intense Brazilian percussion and Zorn herself, who, acting as a third band member, comps sympathetic harmony notes with her voice while the guitarist solos.

Zorn's classical background is something she has in common with Muscatello, her colleague at Skidmore, where he has taught guitar improvisation for 18 years. Before turning to jazz, Muscatello studied classical guitar and was smitten with the works of Cuban modernist composer and guitarist Leo Brouwer, as well as by Bartók, Hancock and Shorter.

"There's a lot of improv on the record," he said. "The fact that it's just solo guitar throughout — no bass player — means I have to be the bass player and the guitarist, which is like classical guitar."

The album "includes everything I love," Muscatello said. "Words, vocals, love stories, solo guitar, improvising, jazz, classical, drums. I feel like, if it were the last record I ever made, it really kinda sums up my life as a guitar player.

"Discovering my own voice was like discovering my authentic self," Zorn mused further. "It can be lonely, daunting work. I was fortunate to have Tierney's patient, compassionate, non-judging guidance. She made me realize that we don't have to walk alone."

—Allen Morrison

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