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MUSIC

MUSIC; The Case of the Singer Jazz Never Appreciated

By BARRY SINGER

JAZZ has many mysteries. The unpredictable alchemy of improvisation is one. The impenetrable lineage of musical influences is another. Perhaps the greatest mystery in jazz, though, is the mystery of neglect. Why are certain talents embraced by jazz audiences and, ultimately, by jazz history, while others are not?

This mystery is particularly confounding with regard to jazz singers. Instrumentalists, whatever their gifts, may become obscured in an ensemble. Jazz singers are always down front. You can't miss them.

Perhaps the best jazz singer singing today is a woman almost everybody seems to have missed. Her name is Mary Stallings, and starting on Sept. 25 she will be appearing at the Village Vanguard. The route Ms. Stallings has traveled to reach the Vanguard is quite an unusual odyssey. Manhandled by the music industry as something of a child prodigy, she chose to walk away while still in her 30's and build a more rewarding life for herself away from jazz.

Like so many jazz singers before her, Ms. Stallings, who is in her late 50's, began singing in church. By the age of 15, she had already landed gigs in her home town, San Francisco, including opening for the popular saxophonist and singer Louis Jordan. (He hired her to join him on the road, then fired her when a final exam made her late for a rehearsal.) Ms. Stallings toured Australia, groomed by Shirley Bassie's manager as a brassy showbiz belter, only to return home to pursue her true passion in San Francisco jazz clubs, often playing opposite comedians; one was Lenny Bruce, who also tried to sign Ms. Stallings as a regular touring partner.

It was the vibraphonist Cal Tjader who secured Ms. Stallings's first -- and for the first 30 years or so of her career, only -- recording date, the album "Cal Tjader Plays, Mary Stallings Sings," released in 1961 on the Fantasy label. Engagements in Tokyo, Manila and Bangkok ensued, along with work up and down the West Coast. One night in the early 1960's, Dizzy Gillespie invited Ms. Stallings out of the audience and onto his bandstand to sing. They wound up playing the Monterey Jazz Festival together. This appearance brought a call from Billy Eckstine, resulting in a yearlong stint for Ms. Stallings with Mr. Eckstine's big band, followed by a three-year residency as the Count Basie band's "girl singer," beginning in 1969.

Yet the logical next steps -- more recording, a solo career -- somehow slipped away. One would think

that Fantasy, a highly respected jazz label, would have recorded a follow-up to Ms. Stallings's well-received debut. Whether through ineptitude or inertia, it did not. Promises of recording work with Basie also failed to materialize. "A Basie arranger, Neal Hefti, heard me doing his tune 'Girl Talk,' and told Basie he wanted to write for me," Ms. Stallings recalled recently by telephone from San Francisco, where she still lives. "But it all got really political -- it's always so political. Basie was wonderful, but he had people around him who didn't want me recording, so it didn't happen. After that, I just came home."

Blame is a difficult thing to assess within the vortex of show business aspirations. Neglectful record companies and spiteful road managers can make life hell for a young talent. But Ms. Stallings concedes she never had the gumption to force the issue: "Even though I was a performer and loved the stage, I was very quiet, extremely shy and deathly afraid to speak up for myself. I finally just decided I was going to raise my daughter, Adriana, and make a living doing something else. And I have: designing clothes." Supplementing that income with money socked away from her singing years, Ms. Stallings, as she herself put it, has "made out fine."

Listening to her sing today, the signature sounds of jazz song greats throughout history seem to surface and recede, blended in a thoroughly individual vocal style. One hears the lithe charm and impeccable rhythmic vitality of Ella Fitzgerald; the steel-sheathed vulnerability of Holiday; the bottomless vocalese of Sarah Vaughan; Dinah Washington's earthy blues sense and Jimmy Scott's ethereal phrasing, alongside more than a whisper of Carmen McRae's regal musicality.

In an odd way, though, Ms. Stallings most brings to mind another neglected jazz great, Carol Sloane, whose recent extended run at the Oak Room in the Algonquin Hotel was a tour de force exercise in effortless jazz singing (as is her forthcoming CD, "I Never Went Away," on High Note Records). Where Ms. Stallings can wail when she wants to, Ms. Sloane rarely seems to raise her voice, managing this feat while holding her microphone at arm's length. It is a display of consummate technique in the service of luminous interpretive nonchalance that Ms. Stallings often matches, not necessarily in style but rather in overall effect. It is jazz as conversational art.

Sure, there are modern-day image problems to contend with. Though strikingly attractive, Ms. Stallings is a mature woman. She is not a blond vamp. She eschews dreadlocks or waist-length curls. She has no clearly marketable look. Her choice of material, while wide-ranging, is not gimmicky, never striving for a forced contemporary eclecticism.

Of course, these unfashionable details hardly account for Ms. Stallings's obscurity. The ascendancy of rock 'n' roll itself surely contributed to that, killing jazz singing as a saleable commodity just as Ms. Stallings was coming of age. And yes, she has caught very few breaks along the way.

What no one has ever quantified in a jazz singing career, though, is the value of sheer tenacity and ambition. Battered and bruised though she was, at times, Billie Holiday was anything but a shrinking violet where her singing was concerned. Fitzgerald, Vaughan, Washington and McRae were all pretty tough-minded ladies. They demanded on behalf of their talent, persevered and so succeeded.

Ms. Stallings just couldn't manage this. "Maybe I wasn't ready to take the responsibility," she said. "If I'd had a little bitch in me, I might have been heard."

Early in the 1990's, Ms. Stallings flirted with rediscovery when Carl Jefferson, the founder of Concord Records, signed her to a three-record deal on the promise he would at last make her a star. But Jefferson died a short time later, and Ms. Stallings's three Concord recordings were never widely distributed.

Then, in 1999, Lorraine Gordon, the owner of the Village Vanguard, heard a tape of Ms. Stallings singing. "I'm always looking for a good singer," Ms. Gordon said. "The way she sang made me want her."

Ms. Gordon began searching for Mary Stallings. "Finally, after months, I got a number and called. Mary was in a state of shock. Here's this lady on the phone with a man's voice saying she owns the Village Vanguard and wants to book her. I had to convince Mary I was for real."

Ms. Stallings first appeared at the Vanguard in November 1999, following the next year with a run that was recorded and recently released on the Maxjazz label as "Mary Stallings Live at the Village Vanguard."

As Ms. Gordon remembered it: "I called every critic and major record company exec in New York. Nobody came, except for one record guy, and he never called back."

Is it her voice? Her age? Her songs? Her hair? Or is it just her own fault? What is it about Mary Stallings that makes her a jazz legend in reverse?

Fortunately, there's still time to find out.

Photos: Mary Stallings performing at the Damrosch Park Band Shell in Lincoln Center Out of Doors. (Jack Vartoogian)