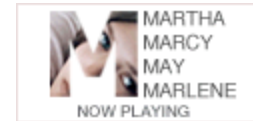


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MUSIC

MUSIC; An Attempt To Recapture The Elusive Piaf Mystique

By BARRY SINGER

WHERE singers are concerned, imitation is often the insincerest form of flattery. Imitating the sound of someone else's voice is never solely an act of homage, however inspired by admiration. Rather, it is a kind of cannibalization, with one singer feeding on a more singular existing voice and saying: "Hey, I can do that. But this way."

Even the greatest vocalists started out imitating somebody. Sinatra had Bing Crosby; Dylan, Woody Guthrie. Billie Holiday readily acknowledged both Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong as models: Smith for her "big sound," Armstrong for his feeling. Yet how quickly did these artists transmute their influences into something wholly original.

Raquel Bitton, a 38-year-old cabaret singer from San Francisco, is, to put it mildly, stuck on Edith Piaf. Since discovering the repertory of Piaf in 1982, Ms. Bitton, who was herself born in Marrakesh, Morocco, has helped produce a show about the legendary French chanteuse for National Public Radio, consulted on a television documentary, composed a play with music about Piaf's friendship with Jean Cocteau, written the scenario for a full-length Piaf ballet and, most decisively, learned to sing very much like her idol.

"Raquel Bitton Sings Edith Piaf (The Golden Album)" (Sparrow Productions RB4271-2), Ms. Bitton's new CD, is an eerie study in the outer limits of vocal impressionism. There is the exacting verisimilitude with which Ms. Bitton (abetted by her elegant arranger, Bob Holloway) recreates the orchestral environment that contributed so much to Piaf's mystique: brusque horn- and string-driven orchestrations, lush and spiny all at once, a velvet grip that could break a listener in two. There is the unmistakable passion Ms. Bitton brings to her invocation of the Piaf vocal spirit, the requisite fierceness of elocution, fluttery intensity of vibrato and R's rolled like a flotilla of drunken sailors along a seaside quay. There is also, inescapably, more than a touch of ghoulishness about the precision of this Piaf reanimation. In meticulously reflecting the glow of Piaf's fire, Ms. Bitton buries most of the "Little Sparrow's" incandescence -- her utter emotional nakedness.

Well, how could anyone recapture that? The quality that made Piaf's singing Piaf was . . . well, Piaf. The qualities that make Ms. Bitton the singer are difficult to define beyond the influences of Piaf, which is in no way to diminish her accomplishment here but only to wonder at it.

UNSURPRISINGLY, the differences are the most revealing. Where Piaf's voice was, indomitably, a brass instrument, Ms. Bitton's is more a harder-to-tune reed. Where Piaf slugged out signature tunes like "Mon Legionnaire" at unflinching tempos, Ms. Bitton chooses a milk-the-emotion pace that adds almost a minute to Piaf's original recording of that song. Given Piaf's own penchant for melodrama, that's an awful lot of extra bathos to bathe in.

Ms. Bitton has recorded three previous CD's. On two of them, "In a Jazzy Mood" and "I Wish You Love," as well as on this one, her affinity for the music of French popular songwriters of the period from the 1930's to the 1950's defines her. The spotlight she throws on these neglected masters -- Paul Misraki, Charles Trenet and Henri Contet -- is welcome. Though they were a generation of imitators in their own right, each transcended imitation by re-rendering the style and substance of the American popular song with a French spin.

Ms. Bitton's most adventurous outing is the CD on which she sounds the least comfortable, "Changes" (1996), a Piaf-goes-to-Nashville take on American country-western tunes addressed as French chansons. Here, venturing far from her sources, Ms. Bitton, while much at sea stylistically, reveals more of herself emotionally, her vocal tone both lighter and more lyrically exposed, her vibrato less assaultively combative.

We live in imitative musical times, and Ms. Bitton is hardly alone. Singers like Bobby Caldwell release retro recordings of vintage Sinatra and Bobby Darin that nearly replicate the originals. The dominion of hip-hop regards sampling as its power and glory. Celine sounds like Streisand, and Mariah like Whitney -- or is it the other way around? In opera, every new tenor is the next Domingo or Pavarotti. On Broadway, mimetic musicals like "Kat and the Kings," "Swing" and "Saturday Night Fever" are to their musical sources as minstrelsy once was to African-American musical expression; grotesque, clownishly imitative diminishment of doo-wop, big-band jazz and disco, respectively. Sure, these shows offer contemporary audiences a brush with something predating current MTV sounds. But one wonders what any listener might take away from these encounters. Can such pallid imitation illuminate anything at all?

Thankfully, there are still exceptions. Harry Connick Jr. and Diana Krall started out imitating other singers -- he the younger Sinatra, she Nat Cole. Both, however, have evolved into distinctive vocal artists. And there is nothing remotely pallid about Ms. Bitton's Piaf tribute. No doubt it will send a few people out to buy her CD and many more back to the racks for Piaf's own discs. Wouldn't it be nice, though, if more than a few kept on listening for a singer with something to say that we haven't already heard -- and, more important, don't already know?

Photos: Raquel Bitton.; Edith Piaf.

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