

Heritage Music Review:

Heritage Music Review-May 2007

For Dina Blade, It's All About the Song

by Doug Bright

Seattle vocalist Dina Blade's passion for the great American songbook is evident in her straightforward singing style and thematic glimpses of musical history that characterize her CD's and live shows, such as "Too Marvelous For Words", a lyricists tribute on May 18th at Bake's Place in Issaquah.

A native of the Philadelphia area Dina Marie Catherine Matecki was born into a family whose love of music and dancing can be traced back to her grandfather, Walter Matecki, who came to this country from Poland in the early 1900's and started a band with his brother. Consequently, young Dina was treated during her formative years to a veritable feast of music that included the polkas of her Eastern European heritage, the lush pop balladry of Johnny Mathis, Harry Belafonte's popular calypso renditions, and the big-band swing of Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, and Sammy Kaye.

Her father was especially partial to vocalists like Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby. "Mostly I remember hearing Bing," she says. "My parents went dancing regularly to live music, which meant Saturday night was a big deal for them." There was also plenty of musical input from older siblings.

"My sister, Barbara, was a huge musical influence on me," Blade recalls, "because we shared a bedroom and I was exposed to her musical tastes: Motown, doo-wop, and folk. She often played Joan Baez recordings, and my favorite was her first record with the old English ballads. She played some of those and other folk songs on guitar, and we would harmonize on them together. I learned guitar chords from a Mel Bay book to emulate her. I idolized her."

One of Dina Blade's biggest breaks as a vocalist was the chance to work with swing revivalist John Holte and his Radio Rhythm Orchestra. "John Holte offered me the opportunity to sing with a big band," she explains, "along with a weekly gig at The New Melody Tavern with a septet, where I honed my material and met many musicians with whom I still play. I advise all serious singers to do a Big Band stint if possible because it is an extremely valuable experience as well as being a trial by fire that opens one's ears like nothing else."

The next milestone in Dina Blade's career was the release in late 1991 of her debut quartet recording, DON'T BE AFRAID. Backed by Dave Peterson on piano or electric guitar, Chuck Deardorf on bass, and Dean Hodges on drums, Blade presented a widely ranging program encompassing buoyant swing treatments of "It's A Wonderful World" and "Wrap Your Troubles In Dreams", the beautiful, sensitively delivered ballad "My One and Only Love", a delicate jazz-waltz rendition of "How Little We Know", a smoothly Latinized "I Remember You", and a brooding torch ballad called "Sidewalk Sale" written by Seattle's Steve Rice. Though her voice was still expressive, her innocent exuberance had by now given way to a more subtle delivery that placed a slightly greater emphasis on her lower range. To paraphrase Joni Mitchell in "Both Sides Now", it was a case of, "Something's lost but something's gained." "While the Three Way Street album featured Blade's vocals to good advantage," I wrote at the time of the album's release, "this one is the showcase her clear voice and subtle delivery deserve."

It was about this time that Dina Blade found it necessary to refocus her musical career for the happiest of reasons. "I was six months pregnant when I recorded DON'T BE AFRAID," she explains. "After the birth of our daughter, I wanted to explore education and outreach venues as other options for singing because, as a new mother, the late night club hours were taking their toll."

An early source of inspiration was vocalist Susannah McCorkle, whose spellbinding musical biographies of great American songwriters elaborated on their compositions with revealing stories and thought-provoking commentary. "I had seen her at one of her early rare Jazz Alley appearances," Blade

explains, “and was impressed by the way that her interesting patter between songs kept her sets infused with a vibrancy previously unknown to me. A few years later I saw Andrea Marcovicci’s Intiman show about Irving Berlin’s music and was again inspired.”

While involved with a Washington State artist-in-residence program, Blade had gained valuable experience researching and presenting programs that traced the evolution of tap dance. Consequently, theme shows on the great American songbook were a very logical next step. She found a willing collaborator and accompanist in pianist Barrie Vye, whom she had met working with John Holte. “Barrie Vye was a WW2 vet who helped me choose material from the extensive list of World War II megahits,” she explains. “I added historical anecdotes, and it evolved into “What Did You Hear In The War, Daddy?,” a program of American popular songs from World War II. I submitted the idea to the King County Libraries as a senior programming option and received 22 requests for May of that first year--Senior Citizens’ Month. I realized then that there was a market to be explored.”

Dina Blade spent the next few years performing with Barrie Vye in the library systems of Seattle and King County, and gigging in schools with the old-time musicians The Canote Brothers, sharing her extensive collection of singing games and dances with children.

Busy as she was, Blade made time to hone her skills with a few lessons in vocal improvisation with pianist Jerome Gray, and it was through Gray that she made the contacts that resulted in her second album. In the course of his instruction, Gray had played her a Mark Murphy album with piano accompaniment by Bill Mays. A native of northern California, Mays had begun studying piano at an early age and fallen in love with jazz at 16 when he heard the legendary Earl Hines in concert. In a few years he was gigging in the Bay Area, and by the time Dina Blade discovered him about 35 years later, he had become a first-call accompanist for singers on the national jazz scene.

She had attracted the attention of Seattle’s Pony Boy jazz label and was gearing up for a recording project when she learned that he was coming to Centrum, the Port Townsend arts organization responsible for the Fiddle Tunes festival. “When I saw that Bill was coming out to Centrum for Jazz Week,” she recalls, “I called him and sang into his answering machine. He called me back, and we met for the first time when I picked him up to go to the recording session. He was charming, witty, and hilariously funny, and we got along beautifully.”

The resulting CD, *S’WONDERFUL*, emerged in 2001. Aply backed by Mays, bassist Bob Magnusson and drummer Joe LaBarbera, Blade ranged from well-known standards like “On The Street Where You Live”, and “That Old Black Magic” to pianist/composer Bill Evans’ moving ode to childhood innocence, “Waltz For Debby”. With this warmly produced masterpiece of creative synergy, Dina Blade had achieved another milestone.

Blade’s next recording, *I’M IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE*, was devoted to the songs of Dorothy Fields, the lyricist responsible for such classics as “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love”, the well-known title track, and “The Way You Look Tonight”. In keeping with the format for her historical theme shows, Blade was backed by only Bill Mays’ piano. “I was doing a lot of duo work at the time,” she explains, “so it seemed like a good idea to keep it simple and intimate with just the two of us. It made sense to choose material Bill was familiar with since we would not have the luxury of a rehearsal. It was a wonderful experience and the right decision.”

Dina Blade’s latest CD, which she released last fall, is entitled *MY ROMANCE*. In addition to the American songbook classic for which it’s named, it features an invigorating samba treatment of “It Might As Well Be Spring”, a slow and luxurious reading of “Imagination”, and an appropriately buoyant treatment of “Give Me The Simple Life”. As one might expect, she unearths a few forgotten treasures from yesteryear as well. “Miami Beach Rhumba” comes from those seemingly carefree days when Cuba was a celebrated vacation paradise instead of a Communist dictatorship. The album’s wittiest, most shamelessly pun-filled offering is “Rhode Island Is Famous For You”, and naturally, Blade has way too much fun sing-

ing it. Mose Allison's wonderfully wry social commentary "I Don't Worry 'Bout A Thing ('cause I know nothin's gonna be all right) gets a guest appearance from tenor saxophonist Craig Flory.

With pianist Hans Brehmer, bassist Larry Holloway, and drummer Ken French, Blade once again achieves a warm ensemble synergy here that's further graced by Scott Kettron's more ethnic percussion and Jim Knodle's cool-jazz muted trumpet, and provides further proof that for Dina Blade, it's all about the song.