



IN CONVERSATION WITH KARRIN ALLYSON

By *Marissa Dodge*



Your recordings have become more like collections of works of art rather than CDs. What musicians and composers will you collect next?

Thank you. Our new album is coming out in March of 2008 and it's Brazilian material; some of it's Jobim, but not all of it. Rosa Passos - great singer from Brazil, wrote a beautiful song called, "Outono," which means "Autumn," and Paul Williams wrote the English lyric for it...

Paul Williams wrote lyrics for Ivan Lins' music as well.

Yes, the same kind of collaboration, but the song is quite different. There are also two Edo Lobo and Vinicius de Moraes songs that my friend, Chris Caswell - the gentlemen who wrote many of the lyrics to the Footprints songs - wrote new English lyrics to, and there are two Jobim songs, "A Felicidade" and "Vivo Sonhando," that Susannah McCorkle wrote English lyrics to. We recorded it at Sear Sound, NYC, where we did Footprints, Wild For You, and In Blue.

Sonically as well as musically, Footprints is a great recording; all astral tracks and your sound is so warm and in the room. It's nice to hear the presence and quality of your voice rather than effects and overproduction.

Thank you. I've been using the same engineer, Josiah Gluck, since Ballads. My producer, Nick Phillips - who played trumpet on Footprints - has been with me since my third CD. We've built a strong studio relationship. Also, my partner, Bill McGlaughlin is extremely helpful in the studio.

Bill is a fount of musical knowledge and multi-talented like you. It's great to have a trusted support system, then you can just fly.

Yes, and there's a ton of work for me to do. I'm extremely involved with this recent project. I arranged some of the songs and co-arranged the rest. I always choose the material and the players, schedule what and when we record, and we just finished mixing it and I'm very involved in that too.



What makes you fall in love with songs?

That's kind of a mysterious thing, I think, for everyone, but obviously if it's a great melody or if the lyrics are happening - and maybe it's not both - you're lucky if it's both. If it has a meaning, one that everyone can get, or if it has a meaning to you and you hope to portray it for others, also the storytelling qualities, and the messages.

Do you ever pick one because it just feels good to sing? Say, a melody that's a great jumping off point that you can improvise on layer after layer?

Yes, that's a good point - true. And maybe that's a real 'live' consideration, like you're thinking about what tune you want to start with, which is very important to get you going and connecting with the audience and your players. That's important throughout the performance, but especially that first song. So yes, you definitely think, "It's not like I have to send a message and tell a story on this first song, I just want to get a flow going."

I've seen you live a few times, and you're a superb performer. What do you think about doing a live CD?

Thank you. We've thought about it, it's in the future, it just hasn't happened yet. Live recordings have their own sets of challenges.

A live studio CD with an audience would be cool...

...that would be very cool, I like that idea.

What tracks from Footprints are closest to your soul?

I like the title track a lot; I love that lyric and the treatment of that song. I love to groove around with "The Turnaround," that's fun, and I play both of those songs live on piano, so it's also fun to connect that way. I think "Con Alma" is beautiful, the lyric and the treatment. Separating myself from it, I like doing those tracks 'live.' "A Tree And Me" is beautiful - Oscar Brown Jr.'s song - I play piano on that one 'live' too.

Your recording of "A Tree And Me" sounds exactly the way it should be - it's a framed portrait. Like "Con Alma," it also has classical shadings, a natural for you on piano.

We lovingly borrowed Oscar Brown Jr.'s version of that tune, it's really his. His is also a vignette, he doesn't take it out or improvise on it, it's a poem. Bruce Barth plays on the recording, and I play it 'live' unless Bruce is on the gig, but I've lost him to Tony Bennett. With my guitar quartet - which I love - I play more piano, I also stand up and sing because I like that freedom.



When you accompany yourself on piano, do you sing differently? Do you feel more or less comfortable with a song?

I've been told I sing differently, from sound people, when I'm sitting vs. when I'm standing. I haven't thought about it that much as far as the projection - hopefully, to a certain extent that's the sound engineer's job. I don't think I approach it that differently, although I'm multitasking...

...and your attention is divided, yet, you're the core of the music. Do you feel that grounding tonal center when you're at the piano?

Yes, I do. When I sit down it's a very comfortable feeling and it's more challenging too, it just depends on the song, how complicated it is, and if I'm just learning the song. For example, many of the songs I'll end up playing piano on for performances though I wasn't necessarily playing on the recording, so a lot of them are still new to me.

Would you like to record an entire CD with you playing piano and singing, whether solo, trio, or quartet, but essentially you as the nucleus?

That's an interesting idea. You know, I already feel like the nucleus - but I know what you're saying - and that happens more 'live' than in recording, so maybe someday, sure.

Most of my favorite vocalists play piano; Sarah, Carmen, Shirley Horn...do you feel that your piano background has given you a more complete, well-versed method of singing, especially in your impeccable improvisational skills?

Thank you. When I learn songs I sit down at the piano with them. Usually I do that, even if it's something I never really plan on playing. Like if it's a real up bebopper, that's not my thing at the piano. I'll still learn the melody on the piano and play around with it. But yes, I do feel that, especially when singers come up and ask, "What would you suggest I do if there's just three things?" Number one is, do you play any piano? If you can, get some keyboard knowledge. It doesn't mean you have to perform for people on the keyboard, but it certainly helps you as a musician.

It beats the sense of chords and harmony into you. More singers should play piano.

Yes. I'd like to eventually to take a more harmonic approach to my improvisation. I think it's probably more melodic based up until now...

...I hear it all within your solos, and I also hear melodies that are ready-made compositions. How about writing music?



That's a good point, my lyricist/composer friend, Chris Caswell, will say, "Just improvise into a tape recorder and let's make a melody out of it." So we do that already. Chris and I have songs that we've written together, and I have songs that I've written the music to. One blues tune is on a CD that we've done, "Sweet Home Cookin'." That's my tune, and there are a couple that I've written partial lyrics to and I wrote the lyric to "Jordu" on Footprints. But there are pieces that I do write music to, so that's in the future.

It's a natural progression because your improvs sound composed - still in the moment and not contrived, but composed. That's a rare skill with vocalists, but the best ones do it. I've always loved the way Ella laid her solos out.

That's true, she was the master.

She was, but you're a master at it as well. I always get a kick out of listening to you scat.

That's very kind, thank you, Marissa.

Speaking of "Life Is A Groove," I dig that.

That's a fun one.

And of course there's not enough time to talk about how much we love Nancy King.

Oh gosh, yes!

She's great. How did you come up with the lyric for "Life Is A Groove?"

I was driving to a gig from Kansas City to Minneapolis and listening to my favorite Clifford Brown, Max Roach offering of that song and "Joy Spring" and all that. So I thought, "I love this little tune," and I just started writing that lyric. Sometimes it happens that way but usually it doesn't! (laughs).

Yes, it's sporadic at best. Did you feel more comfortable singing that lyric because you created it?

No, less. I feel it's a very personal thing to sing your own lyrics. As a singer you're already pretty naked out there, and if you're singing your own lyrics - and music is one thing because it's a little more ethereal, meaning the melody or the chords - but it's different when you're singing lyrics. Though sometimes as a singer/songwriter you're kind of taking the role as an actress, and it's not necessarily you you're talking about.



It becomes conceptual, yet we always wonder if the writer lived the lyric. Though one of your gifts is interpretation - both lyrically and melodically. Your fluency in musical styles is your differentiator. It's always Karrin, but you truly become the style, you don't just imitate it.

That's nice of you to say that, because that's important to me.

I can tell it is because you excel at it. I've often wondered how much of it is innate, and how much of it is skill and work, but my theory is that the key to capturing styles from Brazilian to bop - everything you do so well - is feel. What is it for you and how do you apply it?

Good question. I do think a lot of it's feel. Even when we can't understand a language...say I'm singing in Portuguese, and I'm not fluent in Portuguese, like opera singers who know a language can both speak and sing in it. I do speak French, and I'm learning Portuguese, and I certainly can't converse in it, but you sing like you can. You don't have to understand the language to get the feel or the style down. People love Edith Piaf in this country, they don't necessarily know what she's singing, but she has so much heart, soul, and feel in it that you get it.

How to prepare for it? I get tutoring in the languages, I don't take it lightly or simply sing it syllabically. I want to know as much of the meaning as I can and get the accent down as close as I can. It's hard, but I love languages, so it's a labor of love. Also, getting the grooves down - I think what really captures us at first with Brazilian music are those wonderful samba, bossa, and folk grooves. Brazilian music has become such a big part of the American songbook too - so many great Brazilian composers.

Yes, it's 'people's' music. On the Concord Voices of Jazz DVD, you nail the blues with "Moanin'" then slip right into a Brazilian groove with "My Little Boat." When you're swiftly switching styles, do you hear a piece of it in your head, feel the groove like a drummer would, get it into your body, and then walk into it, or?

Yes, because live you have to switch from style to style on a dime, and it's not always successful, especially with bebop - time is everything, really. But say you've finished "Moanin'" and you're going to do a bebop song, the tempo is important because if you're spitting out words, like on "Joy Spring," you want to be able to make your words understandable. Bebop has that continuum.

It's rapid-fire.

It is, and you can't look back, you have to keep moving forward.

That's the fun and the fear of it.



Yes, bop is an amazing intellectual challenge.

It was a treat to hear you, Jon Hendricks and Nancy King on “Everybody’s Boppin’.” What a great trio! I smiled at your laugh on Jon’s solo, as if to say, “How’d you come up with those riffs, Jon!”

That’s so much fun to be in the same room as them, the energy is amazing! The laugh? Well, you know you try to as much real stuff in there as you possibly can.

Nancy is wonderful; I’m drawn in by everything she does.

Me too. When I first saw her live, I was on the edge of my seat crying and laughing.

Are there other art forms that inspire you musically; literature, visual arts, nature?

I’m nature girl. I love being outside and I’m an environmentalist. I love movies. I love to read biographies, novels, and nature magazines - almost anything.

Do you constantly hear music and rhythms in your surroundings?

I have pretty acute hearing and for what I do for a living that’s good, but when you’re living in the city it’s not so good. I’ve always been bothered by noise. I usually work it out in rhythms - not necessarily intentionally, it’s just percussive stuff.

How do you turn it down and find the peace and silence we need to refill the cup?

Getting outside, or trying to get enough sleep. I don’t listen to music constantly, I don’t always have my iPod in my ears when I’m out and about.

Do you dream about singing and playing?

Usually when I dream about singing or playing it’s that I can’t find the gig, (both laughing). It’s those incompetence dreams. I can’t find the stage or my clothes. . .

Field day for Freud.

Those are the dreams I have. I don’t have dreams of grandeur or anything like that. (laughs)

You live your dreams of grandeur.

That’s very nice...we certainly have reality, yes.



...sometimes too much. On that note, since reality can be in print, do you ever wish that reviewers who get caught up with your physical appearance would focus instead on your depth, brilliance, and musical accomplishments?

I don't see that very much. I wish that they would, yes. They probably wouldn't do that to a guy, but I don't think they focus on my appearance as much as they do on a lot of other people. We just got a review recently from our Birdland performance from Stephen Holden (New York Times), and he wrote, "With Ms. Allyson there is never any nonsense. She doesn't preen, flirt or act coy." I liked that because I don't try and draw attention to myself particularly, I try to draw attention to the song, the music, and my players.

Has it been a challenge to balance remaining true to yourself and the music vs. the business?

Not really, the challenge of it is to keep track of it all and to find a management team that has the same goals and vision as you. I want someone to show me the way too. I don't always want to be the one to say, "Do this and do that."

You don't want to be preoccupied with it; you're there for the music.

But, I'm constantly preoccupied with it, unfortunately, unless I'm singing or playing. I don't travel with a road manager, I do the bulk of this day to day stuff on my own.

That's a lot to carry and it takes you away from the music. Maybe it's a bit off balance, you could be singing right now.

Not singing, ideally I'd be practicing piano, I'd be singing a little or maybe trying to write or finish one of the ten songs I've started. But, that's an excuse you can always use, "Well, if I didn't have to do this, I'd be sitting at that piano." I've never been a very good "practicer." I usually have to have a project to motivate me. I do enjoy sitting down and playing. Last summer, there was a rare lull in my schedule and I put together my sweet little classical book; stuff I like to play that's challenging but not too challenging, and I started to play classical again, which was my first love.

I'd love to hear you play classical. If you hadn't chosen music, what career might interest you?



I've thought about that lately... (both laughing) there are moments when I think, "Gee, what other options do I have?" (more laughter)

Man, do I know the feeling.

I'm sure you do. Everybody who is rather open minded goes that route sometimes. I feel that I'm a versatile person. As I've mentioned, I love being outside, I don't know how I'd do that all the time, but I used to think that I'd be involved in a social cause - which I am peripherally, but something like joining the Peace Corps. I like working with older folks, I think they're an undervalued part of our society and we have much to learn from them and cherish about them. So those two things, and I'd like to pursue languages more heavily; French was my minor in college and classical piano was my major, but languages and culture interest me.

We've covered alternative lives, how about the afterlife? It's your first gig in Heaven, who's on stage with you?

Heaven huh? You have high hopes for me! (laughs) I think musically I'd rather be in Hell - I'll play with the folks in Hell . . no, just kidding. (laughter). Wow, let's see, that's a hard question because I have so many! Do they have to be dead? (laughs) Because I'd love to see Joni Mitchell live. If she were open to hanging with someone, it'd be fascinating to sing with her.

More among the living that you'd like to collaborate with? The first person who comes to mind is Kurt Elling. You, Nancy King, and Kurt are the hippest in the hemisphere, along with Jon Hendricks, Mark Murphy and Sheila Jordan. You're all innovators, while many vocalists tend to stagnate in rehash mode.

I did get a dream come true to work with and know Nancy, and I pursued that, so that's a good point, and I love Kurt's stuff, we've sat in together before, so I think that would be a really fun project. I admire Maria Schneider's work very much, and Johnny Mandel as well. When I hire people for recordings they're people I've always wanted to work with; Bruce Barth, I pursued him as a pianist, I think he's a fantastic musician - great human being. All the people I've been working with forever; my drummer Todd Strait - everything I do he's right in the pocket with, and talk about being versatile, I couldn't do it unless my musicians were versatile too.

My guitarist, Rod Fleeman, also pianist Gil Goldstein, both beautiful players.

I've been working with vibist, Steve Nelson a lot, also Steve Wilson, a wonderful horn player. I love working with Laura Caviani because she's a great piano player and collaborator, besides being a lovely person and one of my great friends. She's written many big band charts for me, she's so open and hard working. People who are good at what they do love what they do - if that makes sense. I mean in this business you have



to work hard, especially if you're a "side person" - even though I really don't like that term, because it's more of a collaborative thing - but my players have to get behind the music I'm doing. I love working with my long time guitarist Danny Embrey. Bob Bowman has been a huge influence on me. I loved working with Paul Smith (keys) because he was so joyful and swingin'. So it's mostly closer to home, rather than thinking, "Oh... someday I'd like to work with, let's say, Pat Metheny," - although, that'd be fun!

Your piano is calling you. Last question: a wise old man once told me that one of the secrets of life is having things to look forward to. What do you look forward to?

Ah...time off - that's always nice, although I do look forward to wonderful performing opportunities. I look forward to new beginnings but also take great comfort in old friends and my family. I look forward to a new democratic, fair administration.

Amen. Just a new set of problems...

I know it, anything's better than this.

I look forward to what you're going to come up with next. You're one of my handful of inspiring current artists. You give me hope for this art.

That's very nice of you, I appreciate that, and I've always loved what you do, Marissa, I love... (singing) 'Big Moe was a catfish and he only had one wish...' I think that's fantastic, I could never come up with something like that.

Thanks (laughing). But you sang it. I can write all day, but unless I have a Karrin to interpret it appropriately, songwriting can seem fruitless. Thank you for taking time away from making music to talk to me, Karrin. There are so many layers of you that I hoped to discover for myself and your listeners. You're not only a vocalist, but an entire artist.

Well, that's very kind of you, thank you. I feel like it, but you know you always feel like there's so much more work to do; that this part of you needs to be developed and this and that. But every once in a while I guess we can say, "You know what, you did good today."



Karrin's "good" is great - every day. A similar hopeful humbleness exists in each great artist I've been fortunate to meet. Within them lives an unspoken pact to honor the art form they love and to create and contribute work that's worthy of our jazz heritage. Once this more quixotic than gratifying quest takes hold, its like bop, there's no turning back. To quote Karrin's lyric for "Jordu," "I used to dream of playing jazz all night. So if you ask me nice, well I just might pick up my microphone and sing for you, only for you. And so my friend now you can plainly see this is the kind of thing that is for me, as long as we can play in harmony, life is a groove." It'll take the whole world a while to hear the harmony, but as long as Karrin sings and plays for us, life is a groove.



Karrin Allyson, artwork by Suzanne Cerny

View original here;
<http://www.jazz.com/features-and-interviews/2008/2/15/in-conversation-with-karrin-allyson>