

## SONGS OF BRAZIL SPEAK TO JAZZ ARTIST

*SINGER KARRIN ALLYSON TO CELEBRATE NEW CD WITH PERFORMANCES*

By Andrew Gilbert for the Mercury News

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Few jazz artists have made better use of the CD format than Karrin Allyson, a savvy singer who has released a series of inspired concept albums in recent years.

Now she has a new one, "Imagina: Songs of Brasil," her 11th disc for Concord Jazz, the label she's been with for her entire career. To celebrate its release, she performs several shows in the area, including Santa Cruz on Monday, San Francisco on Wednesday and Woodside on June 29.

Possessing a winsome, fine-grained voice and a disarmingly gamine-like face, Allyson (whose first name is pronounced "CAR-in") established a reputation as an incisive interpreter of the American Songbook with mid-1990s albums showcasing her far-ranging musical interests.

But for the past decade, she's used each new release as a canvas for an exacting musical self-portrait.

### Exploring different paths

"It's exactly what the creative process is supposed to do, lead you down different paths," says Allyson from the Manhattan apartment she shares with her husband - composer, conductor and public radio host Bill McGlaughlin.

"That's what makes you an individual, the decisions you make as you're exploring. A concept can sometimes put the artist in a straitjacket, so it's important that it's nice and loose. Part of the process is how you hone in on that theme."

When she started work on "Brasil," Allyson planned to focus on classic bossa novas by Antonio Carlos Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes. But before long, she cast a wider net, finally selecting songs by several Brazilian composers and alternating lyrics in Portuguese and English.

In some cases, like her discovery of Paul Williams' sensual lyric for Rosa Passos' "Outono," finding the material required some sleuthing. In other cases, she drew on the brilliant work of her late label mate Susannah McCorkle, who spoke Portuguese fluently and loved Brazilian music.

Allyson's experience with a polyglot repertoire dates back at least to her first concept album, 1999's "From Paris to Rio," an exquisite session focusing on French and Brazilian standards. She really hit her stride, however, with 2001's outstanding "Ballads: Remembering John Coltrane."

Her inspiration for it, the 1963 Coltrane album "Ballads" (Impulse!), isn't considered one of the tenor saxophonist's classics, but Allyson used it as a blueprint to create a mesmerizing session. Garnering two Grammy nominations and several picks as one of the best releases of the year, it maintained the unified feel from beginning to end of an extended, eloquent statement, rather than a series of disconnected tracks.

"My main thought was that I just loved the 'Ballads' album, the mood and the feel of the album and the way the sequencing worked," Allyson says. "His playing and spirit are paramount, and I didn't think those particular songs had been overdone vocally."

She followed "Ballads" with two albums exploring more contemporary fare.

On 2002's sassy "In Blue," she explored bluesy tunes by songwriters such as Mose Allison, Oscar Brown Jr., Joni Mitchell and Blossom Dearie. On 2004's "Wild for You," she turned pieces by pop icons Elton John, Bonnie Raitt, Cat Stevens and James Taylor into surprisingly effective jazz vehicles.

### **Blues-infused**

"The blues concept had actually been in my mind for several years and could have happened before 'Paris to Rio,' " Allyson says. "It would have been the same blues-infused concept, though with different tunes. When I started to come up with songs for it, I was looking at Horace Silver tunes, a Mingus piece, some straight-ahead blues shouters."

On her 2006 masterpiece, "Footprints," Allyson expanded the jazz repertoire in a more profound way, commissioning Chris Caswell to write lyrics for jazz tunes such as Dizzy Gillespie's "Con Alma," John Coltrane's "Equinox" and the title track by Wayne Shorter.

"I don't think that every album I do has to have a concept for people to grasp what I do," Allyson says. "But I do find it helps me focus more. No matter what you do, you have to start with songs you just love to sing."Karrin Allyson

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