

Valerie Joyce: A Distinctive Voice

BY PETER MONAGHAN

In a world of so many slavishly conventional jazz vocalists, the individualist, no matter whether fully arrived or just well on the way, cheers the soul.

Valerie Joyce possesses so wonderfully idiosyncratic a voice that one cannot help but stop and marvel. What is impressive is not just the striking acoustic quality of it, but the character she builds into it, to create expression that can be both disarmingly vulnerable and arrestingly deeply hued.

And the good folks at Chesky Records, at least, are convinced that she has come along far enough that she warrants national release, and attention.

New York Blue, Joyce's disc on the influential, New York, audiophile label, justifies Chesky's faith in the Seattle singer. It is an assured, convincing album that contains a couple of standards, a couple of more modern songs that could well become standards, and two originals.

Joyce delivers all the numbers with emotional nuance – with maturity... She manages to convey both a sense of discovering lyrics and the resonance of songs, as if for the first time, and a knowing, deeply felt and considered expression of word and music.

Her voice has great range, but settles most often in a lush alto that she shapes with emotional color and loft above a submerged sadness that is part of much fine romanticism.

Jazz writers have described her tone as angelic, resonant, tranquil, and ethereal. It is all that. She can convey the sentiments of jazz songs that sound just so standard in most renditions, and that most often are blanced of the feelings that compelled their writing – most often, love dissolved or longed for, heartache, resignation, that essential sadness.

In a coffee shop last month, Joyce modestly explains how she arrived at all that. "I come from a piano background," she says. "I'm not just paying attention to the singers. I listen to everything else, too." She did not start as a jazz vocalist, nor undergo the formal jazz-vocal training that seems often to divert young singers

from developing their own, individual expression.

She recalls: "When I first got into jazz, I was really into Dexter Gordon, Miles Davis, piano players like Bill Evans, Shirley Horne – the quiet singers, singers who are subtle."

The subtleties of her voice apparently

quality and sensibility. The disc included four originals and modern renditions of well-known standards.

In 2004, the disc prompted a radio personality in Puerto Rico to contact Carlos Franzetti, a well-known string arranger who has worked with David Sanchez, Steve Kuhn, and many others. He intro-



Valerie Joyce; photo by Daniel Sheehan

were loud and clear to David Chesky, the head of Chesky Records. He set her up with a fine band – Andy Ezrin as arranger and pianist, Lawrence Feldman on a warm and sympathetic sax, Jon Hebert on bass, and Gene Jackson on drums.

Like everything on the Chesky label, *New York Blue* was recorded live, and pressed onto disc with no overdubbing, and no large mixing consoles. The recording was done over two days in a Chelsea church, in June last year. Joyce says of it: "I felt very comfortable. The engineers were amazing."

New York Blue is Joyce's second disc. The first, *Reverie* (2002), on her own VJI Music, was both more adventurous and less. The accompaniment by some of the most solid of local players – Jay Thomas, Milo Petersen, Joshua Wolff, Paul Gabrielson, and Phil Sparks – was solidly conventional. Yet, the selection of material seemed an easier fit with Joyce's distinctive vocal

duced Joyce to Chesky Records. Its boss, David Chesky, invited her to New York, and auditioned her for a whole week.

Chesky signed her in October, 2004. She rehearsed with Andy Ezrin for a few days. Then, they and the band recorded *New York Blue* in June, 2005, and Chesky released it in the US, and then Italy, Germany, Japan, and other Asian countries, earlier this year.

In addition to material from her own book, such as "Blue in Green" and her own "Oasis," Chesky asked her to record a Jimi Hendrix tune, "Little Wing," and one by Tracy Chapman, "Baby Can I Hold You."

He also had her record the old vamp anthem, "Fever," an even more unlikely choice, perhaps.

So far, Joyce says, *New York Blue* is doing "just OK" in the US, but "it's doing well in Germany, for some reason. The company was quite surprised, too, because

they didn't really advertise in Germany. A few reviews came out and that created a little buzz."

All this clearly surprises Joyce, too. It's a long way from her childhood in Yokohama, the daughter of an American father and Japanese mother. Her father went to Japan 50 as a young man, seeking business opportunities. Her mother is a classical pianist, and as a child Joyce studied classical piano, too. She says: "Classical music was always in the house, so I naturally just love the music."

Jazz was not something that reached her ears in Yokohama. "I did play in a stage band in high school. It was not a jazz band but I did play a little bit of piano and saxophone in it. My school was such a small, international school. It had no jazz program of any sort. I was introduced to jazz when I came here to the US."

That was in 1991, when she enrolled at the University of Puget Sound, and majored in music business. She was awarded a classical piano scholarship and studied piano with Steven Moore and Duane Hulbert. Moore had a jazz choir and asked her to audition. "That was the beginning of my jazz experience," she says.

In her junior and senior years she played piano in the college jazz band directed by trumpeter Syd Potter. "Syd arranged a beautiful chart for me, of 'Sophisticated Lady,' but I was more a piano player, back then."

But she had caught the jazz bug, and took jazz-improv classes during the summer at the University of Washington with Michael Brockman. And, a friend told her about the Port Townsend jazz workshop." There, renowned, then-Seattle-based singer and vocal coach Jay Clayton "was a very important figure for me, personally," says Joyce.

She was, she says, still finding her transition to American life "exciting but difficult." She had come to Washington state because that was where her father was from, and he was keen to have her attend college here. But "I didn't know anything about the US at first," she says. "Going to a grocery store was a big deal."

But UPS was a difficult step up: The music school was very competitive, and the academic challenge was even greater; but the main issue: "I was not Americanized."

Even now, while she sometimes is described as Japanese-American, in reality she is American Japanese. Her speech at times signals rearing in another land, as do some subtle mannerisms – more than anything, perhaps, it's an issue of bearing, demeanor, and a quiet reserve that is not...how to put it?...typical of highly talented jazz singers making their way.

After moving to Seattle, in 1994, Joyce worked a day job and free-lanced as a musician in the evenings. She sang in various formats, most often with Seattle drum/guitar jazz stalwart, Milo Petersen,

leader and composer of the Jazz Disciples, and played in Jay Thomas's big band as a piano player for four years. "I enjoyed big bands, the massive sounds, but I enjoyed the smaller settings, too," she says.

She played in whatever settings came her way including restaurants that are not known for attentive audiences. "I was 19, 20, 21; it really didn't bother me; I was just too excited about the music. On top of that, my perspectives are a little bit different: I came from Japan, and I was so excited to be able to play in the US. I'd say to myself, 'I'm playing gigs in the US as a singer.'"

But, she says, "I'm older now. I really am more careful. I'm not excited about playing in noisy places."

She has not, she confesses, settled the issue of whether to live in the US or Japan. Winning enough attention that she can profitably spend time in both places may prove her salvation, there. "My parents still live there, but I've lived in the US so long. I do miss Yokohama. But I love Seattle so much, and the US. Asia is such a different place, compared to it. I was so focused for many years about America being a better place, bigger... Now that I'm older, I miss Japan."

America has changed her, and so has the jazz life. For example, she began her singing career in Seattle with her family name, as Valerie Illman, but changed at the suggestion of vaunted jazz coach Jerome Gray. He persuaded her, she says,

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that Illman, which is of Danish origin, would not serve her well, in the jazz marketplace. "The spelling of Illman sounds weird for some people..." That sort of thing.

So, she says, "I told him, 'I'm not going to change my name, but maybe I'll go by my middle name, Joyce.' I'm happy with that."

She studied with Gray while at UPS, coming up to Seattle on weekends. Like so many other Seattle jazz musicians, she counts her time with the publicity-shy Gray extremely rewarding. "He did so much for my career. He helped me with many arrangements. He was so confident in me that that influenced me. I always felt so much better after the lessons."

She seems at ease, now, with her quiet reserve – self-possessed, and forthright. Still, she expresses a common foreigner's insecurity: "I always feel like an outsider, still." In reality, her different perspective on Western culture – on the boundary, able to look in and out, and from within and without – seems a great strength of her art. Listen to her sing jazz standards, the old warhorses, and the words and their sentiments, and their rhythms, are refreshed and refined.

She sings, at times, exquisitely slowly. On her new album, her attentive collaborators slow and slow some more as she feels and projects the emotions of lyrics.

It seems, listening to her, that her destiny may be to develop an even more

personal expression, on the further outskirts of jazz – something akin to, say, a Cassandra Wilson.

At the suggestion, again Joyce takes the compliment modestly. "I guess I do have a different ethos. Sometimes I struggle with that. Sometimes I'm not out there so much as perhaps I should be. I speak English and I'm half-American, but I am very influenced by the culture of Japan."

Her immediate goal is to write more songs of my own. "I just sent some to David Chesky that I'm hoping to record."

And then? "It all depends on how this record does," Joyce says. She is under contract for one or two more discs with Chesky, but sales of the first CD will determine whether those get made.

It would appear that Chesky are putting faith in her, because she appears on two Chesky compilations – their 20th anniversary CD, and an album of the 10 best songs David Chesky believes he has recorded. His Valerie Joyce selection is from *New York Blue* – "Fever." Joyce admits she was surprised to learn Chesky wanted her to record it, at all, and shocked when he selected it among his best-ever tracks. But Joyce does a wonderful job of bringing so vampy a song to new life. She emphasizes the emotional aspects of the lyrics over the carnal. Not that it doesn't have plenty of body in it, an almost plaintive physicality in which the band joins her, swinging gingerly.

Joyce also injects a dreamy remoteness; so, while Peggy Lee's created a submissive persona, Joyce manages to create an element of yet-to-be-won.

The Chesky company is organizing some gigs for Joyce in New York – "More will be revealed, as they say," she says. But she is not planning, for now, to move out east. "There's so much of everything in New York that sometimes you get distracted, and it's expensive."

In addition, she says, "I love nature, and having a water view from the roof garden of my apartment in Belltown. That's important to me." As a child, she lived in a quiet, green neighborhood of Yokohama, and spent a lot of time in northern Morioka, in green, lake-studded mountains similar to Washington's.

She also clearly has a sense of fit with longtime collaborators here. Her most frequent colleagues have included, for many years, guitarist/drummer Milo Petersen, as well as pianist Joshua Wolff, guitarist Paul Sawyer, and bassists Geoff Cook and Chuck Kistler. She still plays piano well, herself, after classical-music training early in life. But she says she would like to form a band with pianist, but where she just sings.

So, with any luck, we'll have her in Seattle for a while more. She says: "I did think about moving to New York when I got signed but then I felt maybe I could get more work done here."

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