

A Road Less Traveled:

Vocalist Greta Matassa Looks Beyond the Standards for Her New Album *Favorites from a Long Walk*

BY TODD MATTHEWS

WHEN JAZZ VOCALIST Greta Matassa looks for inspiration, she hits the road—not on travel adventures around the world, or lengthy concert tours that take her to various parts of the country (Matassa, in fact, rarely travels outside the Pacific Northwest to perform). Her formula is much simpler. She dons a pair of headphones, loads a portable CD player, laces up her best walking shoes, grabs a bottle of water, and heads toward Alki Beach, near her home in West Seattle. As tunes by Carmen McRae, Anita O'Day, Shirley Horn, and Ray Charles fill her ears, they create a catalogue of sorts from which Matassa can form the early roots of what often grow into a new repertoire.

That's how she settled on *Light out of Darkness: The Music of Ray Charles*, an evening of performance that explores a wide range of well- and lesser-known rhythm and blues, jazz, and ballads by the late singer and pianist. It's a showcase of music that she regularly takes to Bake's Place in Issaquah, as well as Tula's and The Triple Door in Seattle.

That's also how she settled on the tunes for her new album *Favorites From a Long Walk*, released Nov. 22 by Origin Records. For *Favorites*—which features Matassa, bassist Clipper Anderson, drummer Mark Ivester, pianist Darin Clendenin, trumpeter Thomas Marriott, and tenor saxophonist Richard Cole—Matassa looked beyond the standards and unearthed more than a dozen mostly overlooked, yet timeless, jazz tunes: 'Inside a Silent Tear,' famously recorded by Carmen McRae, Antonio Carlos Jobim's 'Double Rainbow,' and the heart-wrenching Shirley Horn tune 'He's Gone Again' are the record's highlights.

"I just started to avidly mine for tunes that struck me," says Matassa, 43, during a visit weeks before her album's release. "I



PHOTO BY TASHA OWEN

Greta Matassa will hold CD release parties for *Favorites from a Long Walk* on December 9 and 10 at Tula's.

know so many standards—I have about 2,000 songs on my song list. I was really looking for songs that kind of struck me, and that I had never heard before. Some of these songs would sort of be my soundtrack for a minute while I was walking. Some of them were just so uplifting that I thought, 'Well, I better write that one down. That's one I got to have.' If it raised the hair on my arms, I knew I was listening to a good piece of music. That was the ultimate criteria."

Favorites is an album that may surprise many of Matassa's fans. True, her soulful crooning is still there. But it's the song selection that breathes new life into what could have easily been an album of familiar standards. For 'He's Gone Again,' Matassa found a relatively obscure Horn album entitled *The Garden of the Blues* (Steeple Chase, 1984), which was recorded live and features a set-list of seven songs by composer Curtis Lewis.

"[Lewis's] tunes sing themselves," comments Matassa, who learned several

other Lewis compositions, which she performs live, but do not appear on the album. "They're not predictable. I think 'He's Gone Again,' in particular, is such an effective piece. It's devastating, really."

Another surprise for Matassa's fans: *Favorites* is her first studio album since *If the Moon Turns Green* (Matassa Music, 1994). Earlier albums—*All This and Heaven Too* (Origin Records, 2001) and *Two for the Road* (Origin Records, 2003)—were recorded live for reasons financial (studio recordings are more expensive than live recordings) and aesthetic (Matassa performs at jazz clubs so frequently in the Pacific Northwest, the live albums capture her a format most familiar to her audience).

"I'm a very spontaneous performer," she says. "I love to perform live. I like the sound of live albums. I also love the spontaneity of leaving something, flaws and all, on a recording. The last two albums were a fun experience that way, and

I think they *do* capture what I'm like live. But the nature of recording live means you don't have a chance to go back and fix anything. There's just more control in a studio environment.

"Ironically," she adds, "we didn't end up going back and fixing all that much. I think just knowing that we could, it helped us to kind of relax and just enjoy things."

IT MAKES SENSE that Matassa spent so much time mining old albums for interesting songs to include on *Favorites*. Ever since she was a child growing up on Bainbridge Island, she has been drawn to old jazz and rhythm and blues records. Her parents encouraged her interest in music early, and regularly played jazz records in the home. She grew particularly fond of jazz from the 1930s and 1940s. Matassa and her father, a visual artist and West Coast jazz fan, raided local record stores for albums by Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holliday, Frank Sinatra, and Fred Astaire. Back at home, Matassa would sing along to the records.

"As a teenager, I was very much into learning about music by just listening to it, singing along to it, dissecting it," she says. "At the time, I thought, 'I bet I can learn a lot by just singing along with these people. Make them my teachers.' In a nutshell, that's what I did. I ear-trained by listening in-depth and trying to get as close to the particular sounds and things they were doing. I borrowed a lot of it, but I made it my own."

She was so drawn to music that she dropped out of high school in her junior year and moved to Salem, Oregon, where she took a job with pianist and singer Tim Clark. At 17-years-old, Matassa was working at a country club, earning 500 dollars a week, and performing pop tunes. A year later, she moved to Seattle to strike out on her own.

Still, with no contacts in the jazz community, Matassa moved around the heavy metal scene for a while, singing Scorpions and Def Leppard songs in the city's rock clubs. "I learned a lot about vocal power and control from those groups," she recalls, "but I grew tired of the sameness of the material." In the mid-1980s, when a friend suggested she perform jazz standards at wedding receptions, a small door was opened for Matassa. She met saxophonists Richard Cole and James Rasmussen (who hired Matassa to perform and record with his big band Jazz Police), bassist Chuck Deardorf, pianist Barney McClure, and guitarist Michael Powers.

Her biggest break came in 1989, when the Pacific Northwest Ballet asked Matassa to step in for Ernestine Anderson in a program based on the music of Kurt Weill. That exposure led to a grant-funded project with Spectrum Dance Theater.

In the early-1990s, Matassa married, had two daughters, divorced in 2000, and became engaged to bassist Anderson. Through all of that, she continued

to forge ahead with her jazz career. She turned her attention toward recording—her own albums, and albums with other musicians. She also earned praise from local jazz critics. Jazz After Hours host Jim Wilke has said of Matassa, "She has a fearlessness in approaching material that makes her like an instrumentalist in a jam session." *Seattle Times* critic Misha Berson has described Matassa as "a vocal chameleon who can sound husky or crisp, ebullient or wailing, girlish or jaded." Audiences also raved. Matassa was awarded Best Northwest Vocalist honors four times during the Earshot Jazz Golden Ear Awards.

See Matassa, page 19

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EARSHOT: How did you get started singing?

WELLAND: I was at a recording studio as a support musician for Dawn Clement a few years ago. We had some time at the end of a session, so I said, 'Just let me sing something.' And it was so fun, I just got really interested in vocals after that. I've only been singing now for about three years. Jerome Gray, a teacher I had, was kind of pushy about telling me I should sing. At first I thought I had a terrible voice. But I've always been kind of strong-willed. That's the nicest way of putting it. I think if you want something to happen, you have to make it happen for yourself. You can't sit around and wait for someone to notice you. I knew that if I wanted to learn, I'd have to get out and be judged. I knew some people would be kind, others wouldn't. And I knew I had to be willing to fall flat on my face. But if you want something like this, you just have to swallow your pride and do it. These days, I sing all the time: at home, in the car, everywhere. It drives my son crazy. 'Mom, will you stop, he says. I'm sure it bothers my husband, too, but he is the world's greatest supporter.

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Matassa, from page 17

Indeed, Matassa has earned a reputation as one of the top jazz vocalists in the Pacific Northwest. Her live performances are known for their soulful melodies, familiar standards, and loyal audiences. Often, Matassa will perform songs that consist entirely of audience requests. During a performance at Tula's in September, an audience member offered to pay Matassa \$200 to perform 'My Way.' "We did a very nice 'standard' version for him," she recalls, "and while the audience was applauding, he came up to the stage and offered another \$200 to perform it again. Fortunately, I have a pretty large repertoire of stylistic influences, so we gave one of the most soulful versions of 'My Way,' and received a standing ovation. That's my favorite Tula's story."

IN ADDITION TO recording *Favorites* and keeping a busy performance schedule, Matassa teaches a monthly rhythm workshop, in addition to private lessons. On Tuesday evenings, pianist Clendenin, bassist Anderson, and drummer Ivester meet in Matassa's home to work with students on communication with instrumentalists, song forms, solos, arrangements, and stage presence. Each four-week session ends with a performance at Tula's.

The workshops started after two of Matassa's students encouraged her to

expand her private voice lessons. If her students could come up with eight students, recalls Matassa, she would teach a workshop. Five years later, the workshops are still going strong, with new and returning students. "I fully thought it was going to be a one-month workshop," she says, "and that would be it. I guess I hadn't realized the staying power of this kind of thing. I get a real kick out of having them see what singing is like, because it is every bit as much fun to do as it looks like it is. And to have students perform at the end of the month in front of their friends, family, and co-workers—they glow. They just love it. This is such a great way to make a living, and it's fun to share with someone else what it feels like."

For now, Matassa is gearing up for the release of her new album. Though she has no plans to tour ("I'm a mother of two teenage pre-teen girls. I think I'm going to have to be home for a little while," she says, laughing), she'll perform at a CD release party Dec. 9 and Dec. 10 at Tula's, and appear at The Triple Door Dec. 11 to sing the music of Ray Charles.

"A fair amount of the songs on the new album are more contemporary than usual, which means maybe they're from the 1960s," she says, laughing. "You know, I'm just really retro. My jazz education has always been from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. I'm just gradually working my way up to today. In another 20 years, I'll be up to 1990."

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