

Marge Hofacre's Jazz News

Valerie Capers: Wagner takes the A Train

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By DAVID NATHAN

Valerie Capers has a rich and full musical pedigree which serves her in good stead on this her 3rd album, but first for the "Elysium" label. She has bachelor and masters degrees from the Julliard School of Music, the first blind person to graduate from that institution. Ms. Capers is now Professor Emeritus at Bronx Community College where she was Chairperson of the Music department. A composer as well, one of her works *Portraits in Jazz* composed with Helen Walker-Hill, is on the classical album *Music by African-American Women*. Two of her songs appear on this album.

Ms. Capers was a classical pianist before she came to jazz music. There are precedents for this metamorphosis, Andre Previn comes to mind. Mel Powell went the other way. In any event, the classical background with its very structured, "non-improvising" setting has limited neither Ms. Capers credentials nor skills as a jazz pianist. But you can see some of the classical approach in some of the offerings, the most notably being her interpretation of Monk's 'Round Midnight which she plays like variations on a theme (Beethoven's on Diabelli's?). This venerable jazz "classic" played in bop swing, classical sonata and Latin modes. It's quite a musical adventure nicely pulled off.

The first cut is a highlight of the album. The liner notes would have you believe that there is some relationship to Capers' performance of the Strayhorn's piece to the 29 motifs to Wagner's Ring Cycle. I don't hear that at all. What I hear is a hard-driving swing set with Alan Givens' Ben Webster-influenced sax sharing honors with Capers. This is the Ben Webster from the 1940s Ellington Orchestra, not the breathy Webster of

later years. Capers gives Bobby Timmons' Moanin' a rousing rendering with a touch of blues. Her own Organum reveals her classical background and virtuosity and comes complete with very heavy cello-like bass bowing from John Robinson and more than a few runs and arpeggios from Capers.

In the tradition of Nina Simone, Shirley Horn, Jeri Southern and Blossom Dearie, among others, Ms. Capers sings along with playing piano. Her deep, heavy voice has a maternal tone about it, making the listener feel very comfortable and at ease with her renditions of Nature Boy and They Can't Take That Away from Me, Nature Boy is done in both French and English to a Latin beat! Capers delivers her own poignant ballad Always You with sensitivity and feeling. Givens' tenor is also prominent on this record. My One and Only Love is perfect for Capers understated sensitive style. Her voice with rust Mark Martino's guitar helping breathes new life into this Guy, Wood/Robert Mellin classic.

Another feature which should encourage people to consider obtaining this album is the outstanding sidemen who accompany Capers. Sax player Givens has already been mentioned as has Martino. John Robinson, who has appeared on other albums with Capers, has Mood Indigo virtually all to himself with just a little help from Earl Williams' drums. His six minute plus "bass solo is a tour de force. In addition to their blue ribbon soloing, when Capers is lion" the sidemen are supportive, not intrusive. This is a very interesting album with very F music formed by accomplished musicians and is highly recommended.