

# DAILY NEWS

**At Last, Her 'Train' Has Come in:  
It took decades, but jazzier Valarie Capers has a hit**

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By **GENE SANTORO**

After nearly four decades as a composer, singer, pianist and educator, **Valarie Capers** says she's ready to become a household name. And she's jubilant.

"That concert I did at Weill Recital Hall [on June 14] sold out!" says the 63-year old—who looks 20 years younger. "They had to turn people away. The album is on the top 10 playlist for Jazz radio."

The album is "Wagner Take the A Train," on which Capers musically merged two of her favorite composers: Duke Ellington and Richard Wagner.

It's got to be the most offbeat and original use for Wagner since Elmer Fudd sang, "Kill the Wabbit" in the Bugs Bunny classic "What's Opera Doc?"

For Capers, the path to her current success was neither straight nor simple.

Born in the Bronx to a postal worker and a Department of Hospitals employee, Capers was immersed in music early: ballet and dance lessons, singing and playing the piano by ear once she was old enough to reach the keys.

But Capers went blind at age six when an infection attacked her optic nerves. "I remember my father taking me to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, wrapping me in a tan blanket, snow flurries coming down, and getting into a yellow cab." She says. "The last thing I saw was a group of shadowy figures with no faces. They must have been doctors."

Her next stop was the New York Institute for Education of the Blind, a now-defunct Bronx school where she learned the basics of Braille. Then Capers headed to Julliard and, in 1960, became the conservatory's first blind graduate.

"Then," she says, "I had to ask myself, 'What am I gonna do?'" Her younger brother Bobby, a sax and flute player, pushed her toward jazz. And in a way, John Coltrane lent a hand too: His

landmark 1959 album, "Giant Steps," was an inspiration to Capers. She played piano along with the record, slowed it down to learn the solos and drew courage from the fact that "even this genius had to develop."

She had taken a teaching job at Bronx Community College, and eventually became head of the music department. She brought in stellar guests like trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and drummer Max Roach, and introduced Jazz courses.

In 1967, brother Bobby hooked her up with Atlantic records, and she made her record debut with "Portrait in Soul," an album she now winces at.

"I wasn't ready," she admits. "I wasn't seasoned enough as a performer. I was too busy teaching." It was her last disc for 15 years, although she penned "El Toro," a hit for Mongo Santamaria.

With 1982's "Affirmation," Capers says, "I began to be proud of my work." She released the album on her own label: KMA. "It meant Kiss My A--," She says with a laugh. "I wasn't worried about what people thought of my anymore."

In 1992, at the invitation of Richard Wagner's grandson, she visited the composer's home at Bayreuth, Germany, and the opera house that bears his name. From that moment, she began mating Dick and Duke.

Ecstatic at the initial reception for "Wagner Takes the A Train" but recalling past stumbles, Capers isn't taking success for granted. She has taken a break from her duties at Bronx Community and pulled money out of her retirement fund to hire radio and press agents. A couple of TV shows are eyeing her as a guest. And she's making plans for a follow-up CD.

"I'm not waiting years this time," she cracks. "I'm thrilled this is happening now. Musically, I'm at my peak."



Valarie Capers mixes Duke Ellington with Richard Wagner