

## THE BEAUTY OF THE FAMILIAR AND THE BEAUTY OF THE NEW

by Ian Muldoon\*

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I'm a sucker for the familiar. As soon as I laid eyes on Diana Krall's document called *The Look Of Love* (2001) which showed on its cover this seated leggy young-blonde-bimbo gazing longingly into the middle distance, leaning forward with her hands on her right tanned leg, revealed to the upper thigh, her loose black elegant evening wear, and impossibly fragile six-inch heels with delicate tiny black straps gently cradling her ankles and resting across her perfect toes, I thought this was the ideal cover for a cocktail pianist who is tapping into the nostalgia market providing some relief for old men from the ennui of empty afternoons - this is also generally a cashed up demographic.



*Diana Krall: sex sells and is helped a lot by gloss, and promotion... PHOTO CREDIT MARK SELIGER*

The foldout display of the programme has nine photos of Ms Krall in various poses and stages of body reveal, though nipples are not quite evident. Sex sells and is helped a lot by gloss, and promotion, and the imprimatur of a major company such as Verve. But

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*\*Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child's ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York and Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour.*

Verve and the supporting cast, and the so-called Great American Songbook sucked me in, because of my familiarity with these last three.

The album has works by Gershwin, Young, Mercer, Matt Dennis, Hoagy Carmichael, and Rube Bloom, and got a Grammy award for engineering. It also had Christian McBride as bassist; Peter Erskine, drums; and Russell Malone, guitar. *S'Wonderful* (Gershwin/Gershwin) a jazz standard, has been recorded by Frankie Trumbauer, Benny Goodman, Herbie Nichols, Lennie Tristano, and Mel Powell. Krall, sadly, gives it a Jobim touch. *I Remember You* (Mercer/Schertzing); *Cry Me A River* (Hamilton); *The Night We Called It A Day* (Ador/Dennis); *Dancing In The Dark* (Dietz/Schwartz); and *I Get Along Without You Very Well* (Carmichael) are given a reasonable easy listening going-over.



On her latest *This Dream Of You* (Verve, 2020), there are no sexy photos, and there are 12 songs including at least seven from the Great American Songbook: *But Beautiful* (Van Heusen/Burke), a jazz standard recorded inter alia by Billie Holiday, Freddie Hubbard, Bill Evans, Paul Bley, and Chick Corea; *Autumn In New York* (Vernon Duke), a jazz standard recorded by inter alia Frank Sinatra, Billie Holiday, Bud Powell, MJQ, Dexter Gordon and Steve Kuhn; *Almost Like Being In Love* (Lerner/Lowe); *More Than You Know* (Youmans/Rose/Eliscu), a jazz standard recorded inter alia by Benny Goodman, Billie Holiday, Sonny Rollins, Coleman Hawkins, and Claudia Acuna; *Just You, Just Me* (Greer/Klages), a jazz standard recorded inter alia by Artie Shaw, Red Norvo, Lester Young, Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, and Ray Brown; *How Deep Is The Ocean* (Berlin) a jazz standard recorded inter alia by Coleman Hawkins, Nat King Cole, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, John Coltrane, Chet Baker, and Fred Hersch; and *Singing In The Rain* (Freed/Brown). The title track is a song by Bob Dylan.

On the opening track, the ballad *But Beautiful* sounds awkward and laboured. This does not auger well. However, Krall's mid and up-tempo songs *Almost Like Being In Love*, and *Just You, Just Me* work well enough, but her ballad treatments just don't. She's also got superb instrumental support from inter alia Christian McBride, bass; Alan Broadbent, piano; longtime associate Russell Malone, guitar; and drummer Jeff Hamilton. It is a lavishly produced document which I guess is appropriate to Krall's celebrity status. Her "crossover" ability is sterling without question, and a major money maker in the way Rosemary Clooney was but for jazz lovers, it is easy listening with the art works of the great composers - Berlin, Carmichael etc- rather ill-served. It's best she leave ballad standards (especially) to a singer like Australian Chris McNulty - these are the poetic art works written by the likes of Hoagy Carmichael, Cole Porter, Lorenz Hart, Duke Ellington, Harold Arlen and Jerome Kern.



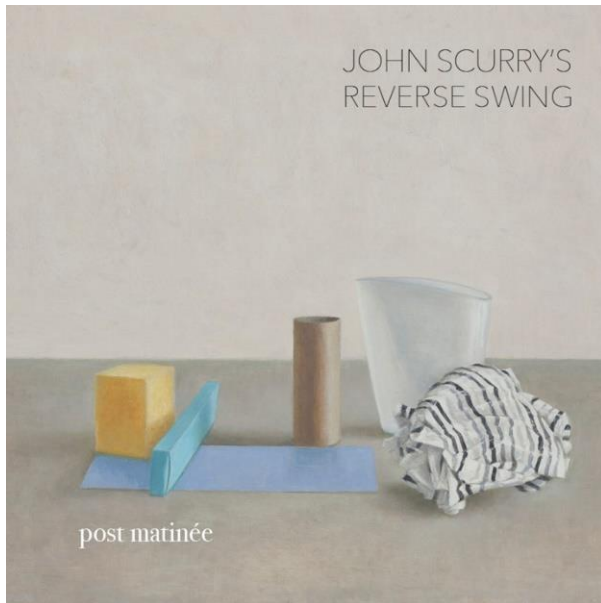
*Diana Krall should leave ballad standards (especially) to a singer like Australian Chris McNulty (above)...*

Speaking of whom, consider James Muller's take on *The Song Is You* (Kern/Hammerstein) (54 Records, 2018), recorded live at Wizard Tone Studios in 2018 with Muller, guitar; Will Vinson, alto saxophone; Sam Anning, contrabass; and Ben Vanderwal, drums and cymbals. It is ten minutes of an up-tempo, exciting, intriguing and swinging, collective performance, which has an outstanding sax solo, and a solo by Muller that I consider among his best on record. The quartet's work here sits comfortably next to other versions recorded by inter alia Charlie Parker, Clifford Brown, Lee Konitz, Art Blakey and Joe Lovano.



*James Muller: sometimes one wishes he did not have to show us everything on every track... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ & BEYOND*

Other standards on the programme are *Evidence* (Monk) which has also been recorded by inter alia Art Blakey, Steve Lacy, Jake Byard, Paul Motian, and Jessica Williams; *317 East 32nd St* (Tristano) which is a highlight of the programme, with great harmony between bass/guitar- enough to make one weep with pleasure; and a compelling groove from Anning with a structurally marvelous, contained and tight solo from Muller as well as an impressive sax solo from Vinson - this is collective groove and improvisation at its finest; and *Scrapple From the Apple* (Parker) which all players handle with aplomb. Muller's three originals include the lovely ballad *Dalby at Dusk*, and sometimes one wishes Muller did not have to show us everything on every track, and let the work breathe, a minor quibble of an outstanding artist where the possibilities seem unlimited - improvisation or swing.



Swing era music is also familiar to me, and the 2016 document *Post Matinée* from the group John Scurry's Reverse Swing (Lionsharerecords) a 17-song programme of originals by Scurry (guitar, leader, producer, jointly with Eugene Ball) with horn-part arrangements by Ball, and all other arrangements shared between Ball and Scurry, is varied, light on improvisation, but well-performed.

Most pieces are mid-tempo and up-tempo, but one of the highlights is the ballad *How Calm The Sea Is Tonight* which has a strong affecting atmosphere with lyrics very well voiced by singer Shelley Scown, and a fine tenor solo by Michael McQuaid. Again the mid-tempo *Your Face (Now you've gone I can't see your face)* is an effectively wry composition with intelligent lyrics, and a vocal by Scown that works.



*Shelley Scown performing at Wangaratta in 1996... PHOTO CREDIT BRENDON KELSON*

Some compositions have a calypso feel (*I'm Still Arranging My Life Around You* and *Otis the Cat*), some have a winsome feel (*Post Matinée*), and some a folk tune feel, especially *A Blackbird Skipped Quivering Between Things*. Scurry's intention was to capture the atmosphere of the Saturday afternoon matinee at the cinema and in this regard he has succeeded admirably. It's a very sweet programme of music and I mean that in the most positive sense. Scurry rarely solos on his acoustic guitar and serves as an effective part of the rhythm section which is drummer-less on six tracks. The basic quintet is Ball, trumpet; Michael McQuaid, clarinet or tenor; Matt Boden, piano; Howard Cairns, double bass and English concertina; John Scurry, guitar; Shelley Scown, vocals, with a much finer voice than Ms Krall on four pieces; Danny Fischer, drums on 11 tracks; James Macaulay, trombone on eight tracks; and Phil Noy, alto saxophone on three tracks.

As to the beauty of the new (and unfamiliar) I listened to Nick Pennington and his document *As It Was* (Wizard Tone, 2016) which has Pennington, guitar; Anna Butterss, upright bass; Angus Mason, drums; with guests James Muller, guitar, on two tracks; and Jason McMahan, tenor sax, on two tracks. Apart from the bass being a little down in the mix, it's a fine outing of originals by the leader with one by the bassist called *Early Days* (Butterss).



The opening track features both Pennington and Muller with the latter revealing a better grip of form in his solo, but both playing beautiful melodic and harmonic music ably supported by bass and drums. Some highlights of the programme include the tenor/guitar harmony on the swinging *Tom* with a tension-filled and finely constructed solo by McMahan, often in the upper register of the horn; and *As It Was*, where again the tenor/guitar harmony is a standout on this mid-tempo piece, with a very fine guitar solo in its use of space and time to build drama, and solid complementary drumming by

Mason. Pennington can sustain interest in his playing, even in a longer solo on the lovely *Slowly* at 7'33".

But the most beautiful new (and unfamiliar) work I've heard in recent times, and the most interesting, is *It's Been A While* (Wizard Tone Records) 2020 by the Christina Guala Saxophone Quartet. The first feeling I got was the lack of straining for effects or importance. It's a programme of seven original works, six by the leader and one by Adam Page called *Seconds*.



The central three-part piece *The Memory Suite*, is bookended by *Goodness Me* - saxophone harmony, counterpoint and swing; *It's Been A While* - alto sax solo of some delight; *Major Seven* - up-tempo swing featuring drums and alto sax; *Miscellaneous Blues* - drummerless swing; and the ballad *No Groove* - with superb harmony from three horns with the baritone countering with an elegiac melody making a poignant end to a fine programme.

The suite is quite impressionistic with very fine felt soprano sax with some stunning held notes; the piece sometimes rings with a melodic dance of the horns, and sometimes an apparent collective improvisation. Presumably the fine arrangements were by the composer. Noteworthy is the role of the baritone saxophone which, apart from providing harmony and bottom and colour to the group, acts as bass in some arrangements. The surprise and beauty of the new and unfamiliar.