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## SUSAN GAI DOWLING & CARL DEWHURST

Album review by Eric Myers

Label: Independent

**Personnel: Susan Gai Dowling (vocals), Carl Dewhurst (electric, acoustic & slide guitar, electric bass, drums), Lisa Parrott (alto saxophone), Ollie Thorpe (pedal steel), Timothy Constable (vibraphone), Nick Garbett (trumpet), Mary Rapp (cello), James Greening (trombone).**

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**I**n 2019, at the Camelot Lounge in Marrickville, I heard a performance by a group consisting of four venerable Sydney female vocalists: two septuagenarians, Joy Yates and Susan Gai Dowling, and two octogenarians, Sandy White and the now deceased Marie Wilson. They called themselves simply Four. I was struck by the fact that between them they had accumulated 250 years in the entertainment business.



*Four L-R: the late Marie Wilson, Sandie White, Joy Yates, Susan Gai Dowling...  
PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK*

That it was not merely a sedate evening was a pleasant surprise. The music was raunchy, full of high energy, sometimes risqué, and always absorbing. A gun rhythm section was on hand, including Dave MacRae (piano), Craig Scott (bass) and Laurie Bennett (drums). Although I was familiar with the work of Yates, White and Wilson over the years, it was sobering to realise that I'd never before heard Susan Gai Dowling live, despite her status as a key figure on the Sydney scene since time immemorial. I quickly realised that this was my loss.

I recently read a critique of Susan Gai's work on the blog *JazzLocal32.com* by an anonymous Kiwi writer who heard her performing in New Zealand. "After hearing her sing I could understand why she was in demand on the Sydney scene after so many decades", he (or she) wrote. "Her voice is warm and slightly smokey and above all it is a real jazz voice. At her command were all of those tricks of articulation that tend to separate jazz singers out from the straight-ahead variety". An apt summary of Susan Gai Dowling's artistry.



*Susan Gai Dowling: her voice is warm and slightly smokey and above all it is a real jazz voice...  
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

This brief album, entitled *Susan Gai Dowling & Carl Dewhurst*, and totalling 18 minutes of music, contains four original compositions. Dewhurst has provided music and lyrics for three of them - *Bernie*, *Wrap Me Up Inside*, and *Be At Peace* – while Dowling does the same for the composition *Hush*.

Of major interest is *Bernie*, a moving tribute to the enigmatic alto saxophonist Bernie McGann, who died in 2013. It's a gentle, lilting waltz with sparing lyrics that are poetic rather than literal – not surprising, as they began as a poem by Dewhurst. He sent it to Dowling who loved it, so he set the words to music. Of course Dowling and Dewhurst worked regularly with McGann for many years and knew him well.

Some very talented Australian jazz players are involved. On *Bernie* for instance, Australian expatriate Lisa Parrott, playing from New York, contributes some soaring lines on alto saxophone, as does Ollie Thorpe on pedal steel guitar in the studio. The result is an unusually lush backing.



*Lisa Parrott, here on baritone sax: on “Bernie”, some soaring lines on alto sax, from New York... PHOTO CREDIT RUEDIGER SCHESTAG*

The second track *Hush*, a soft/funk work with music and (pleasantly mysterious) lyrics by Dowling, is a love song about a relationship that has momentarily gone wrong (“I was so sad when you drifted away”) but apparently all is now well (“your hand is now in mine, we’ve reached a peaceful time”). Instrumental cameos are provided by trumpeter Nick Garbett and Timothy Constable on vibraphone, and there’s an uplifting nine-bar guitar solo from Dewhurst.



*“Hush” features an instrumental cameo from trumpeter Nick Garbett (above) and an uplifting nine-bar guitar solo from Carl Dewhurst (below)...GARBETT PHOTO CREDIT FRANK CREWS; DEWHURST PHOTO COURTESY BANDCAMP*



Dewhurst’s *Wrap Me Up Inside* is another relaxed love song with perceptive lyrics, this time with a gentle country/rock time-feel, which someone like John Denver might have written. Mary Rapp is on cello and in particular Dewhurst on slide guitar gives the piece an authentic country music flavour.



*Mary Rapp (above) is on cello on Dewhurst's "Wrap Me Up Inside" while Ollie Thorpe (below) plays pedal steel guitar on "Bernie" .... RAPP PHOTO COURTESY LOUDMOUTH; THORPE IMAGE COURTESY YOUTUBE*



*Be At Peace*, with a laid-back 12/8 time-feel characteristic of R & B, was written some years ago by Dewhurst, inspired by an old gospel blues by Memphis Slim. It was recorded previously on Susan Gai's album *In Summer*, but Dewhurst says that this version is much closer to how he originally conceived the song. While trombonist James Greening doesn't take a solo, he adds weight to the ensemble.



*On “Be At Peace” trombonist James Greening (above) doesn’t take a solo, but adds weight to the ensemble... PHOTO COURTESY GARY DALEY WEBSITE*

In many ways, this album is Carl Dewhurst’s baby. The music came together chiefly through he and Dowling collaborating in Dewhurst’s Marrickville home studio. Dewhurst not only plays electric, acoustic & slide guitars, electric bass & drums, and has written most of the songs; he is also engineer and producer.

This short album of EP proportions is a gem, dripping with potential for commercial success. Variety is provided by embracing four distinctive time-feels, as outlined above. It is also testimony to the expertise jazz musicians display when they venture into jazz’s close relative pop music. As that unknown Kiwi writer claimed above, the “tricks of articulation” that jazz brings to such music give it a quality that supersedes much of the vacuous pop music that is now relentlessly promoted everywhere in the media.

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*The album “Susan Gai Dowling & Carl Dewhurst” is on Bandcamp at this link <https://carl-dewhurst.bandcamp.com/album/susan-gai-dowling-and-carl-dewhurst>.*

***Another article on this website which may be of interest:***

*Eric Myers, “Four: Jazz Legends Relive Their Golden Years”, The Australian, March 27, 2019 at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/theaustralian-2015-11>*