

I COVER THE UP FRONT

BY KATIE BULL

Jazz singers of substance who front bands possess certain qualities. First of all, they improvise, either by virtue of their expressive phrasing, exploration of established vocabulary or invented material. They remain in conversation with their band and take gutsy charge of a full range. And, as they step into the (front and) center, it's without a neon "It's All About Me" sign hanging over their head (even when the moment is all about them).

The flipside of this wonderful phenomenon is a devolved dynamic; a tensely restrained and over-controlled follow the singer-leader game. Everyone else in the band is stepping back to get out of the way. This can happen in any jazz band (any bad workplace and in virtually all governments), so the problem-side of fronting-run-amok is not particular to vocal jazz. When any player "up front" situation works, there is a sense that the sum is greater than the parts, yet, one part is in the foreground.

Enter Polish-born **Grzegorz Karnas**, one of the most exciting jazz vocalists boldly fronting a band today. In the liner notes on his new album *Vanga* (Budapest Music Center Records), he refers to his trio

of ten years as his "marital bed". Karnas sings and speaks in an array of languages, which merge his mother tongue and English into a deconstructed jazz scat-collage Matisse would love. His extraordinary range dips into sensually warm chest tones and pure falsetto heights. Meld the rawness and emotional abandon of indie rocker Dave Matthews with the clean-lined, tradition-rooted swing of Kurt Elling and you might imagine his sound, but Karnas is actually like no other vocalist—a true original—as he rolls freely in the folds of his trio's musical bedsheets.

From rolling to spilling, we find the extraordinary German experimental jazz vocalist **Agnes Heginger** tumbling with the band Plasmic on to the ensemble page within seconds of the start of *Live at Chili Jazz Festival 2013* (Leo). All the music on the album is collectively composed; a sketched rabbit peers at the listener from the album cover as the listener falls through an unpredictable sonic rabbit hole of entrained swells and spirals the quartet has burrowed. One sonic 'pill' makes Agnes larger and the next moment, she's a white witch channeling ecstatic Indian-esque trills woven with unrecognizable tongues. Heginger invokes a soundscape of unhinged, windblown wooden doors and spirits in a ghost house.

If you want a more straightforward ride, head for the new and completely joyous album by the all-women big band, **DIVA**, titled *A Swingin' Life* (MCG Jazz) led by heavyweight drummer Sherrie Maricle. The album

features veteran vocalists **Nancy Wilson** and **Marlena Shaw** on five absolutely fantastic tracks. This band's consummate artists are 24 strong; they envelop you with an unforgettably vibrant and big sound. The sections are tight, the swing is the best there is and the vocalists are two of the most revered in jazz. **DIVA** is solidly in the pocket.

Let's focus on three of the many amazing clubs where solid singers are a given: Tradition-leaning Minton's Playhouse boasts the self-assured and luminous **Brianna Thomas** in her "Sacred Jazz" selections (Nov. 2nd); the do-not-miss-veteran pianist/singer **Johnny O'Neal** who is his own front (Nov. 4th and 18th); and the Eyal Vilner Big Band featuring Chicago-rooted blues vocalist **Charenee Wade** (Nov. 23rd), a completely grounded spitfire. The luxurious and yet intimate mainstream Jazz at Kitano boasts the Brazilian Trio with guest vocalist **Maucha Adnet** (Nov. 14th-15th) and The Stone features Norwegian singer/composer **Maja Solveig Kjelstrup Ratkje** in a vocal residency that will feature the internationally acclaimed artist's facility with electronics (Nov. 25th-30th).

Speaking of visionary, if you did not catch Darius Jones' *The Oversoul Manual* (AUM Fidelity) live at Carnegie Hall last month, the newly released album, fronted by the collective vocalists comprising The Elizabeth-Caroline Unit, will take you to the final 'up front' frontier. And that just about (hardly) covers it, reporting from the frontlines of VOXNews. ❖