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THE
**BIG BAND
YEARS**
OF
**LOUIS
ARMSTRONG**



THE EDITOR'S CHOICE

BY SANFORD JOSEPHSON



I was pleased to see in early October that vocalist Clairdee's album, *A Love Letter to Lena* (Declare Music) made the first round of Grammy consideration for Best Jazz Vocal Album, Album of the Year, and Record of the Year.

The San Francisco-based vocalist had been scheduled to perform in March at the Sarasota Jazz Festival, and we met at the opening reception where, unfortunately, it was announced that the festival would be canceled, due to the pandemic.

Later, Clairdee and I spoke on the telephone about her tribute to Horne. "It's a risky business honoring an artist as iconic as Lena," she acknowledged. "People have expectations about what songs should be included, or they may make comparisons to the original recordings and the artists." Pointing out that Horne recorded more than 80 albums, Clairdee said she selected tunes "that resonate with me and fit the project's concept. I wanted the song choices to illustrate the story of Lena, the woman, as opposed to Lena, the star." The album also includes spoken word interludes by actress/director/playwright Margo Hall to, in Clairdee's words, "serve as mini-history lessons, bringing Lena Horne to life. Many people don't know much

about her, particularly her civil rights activities and struggles with discrimination, or her close friendship with composer Billy Strayhorn."

Vocalist Clairdee's 'Love Letter' to Lena Horne

Significantly, one of the selections is "That Old Devil Moon", written by Burton Lane with lyrics by Yip Harburg for the 1947 musical, *Finian's Rainbow*, which took a very strong (for the times) stand against racism. Others songs include:

Strayhorn's first collaboration with Duke Ellington, "Something to Live For", written in 1939; his "Maybe", which Clairdee said was written specifically for Horne; and the traditional spiritual "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child".

Horne and Strayhorn, Clairdee said, "were best friends until his death in 1967. The hallmarks of Strayhorn's compositions are his expressive melodies, intricate harmonic progressions, and poignant lyrics."

Another strong influence on Clairdee was Nancy Wilson. "Nancy and I had the same manager, John Levy," she said, "and through John, I got to know her. Nancy raved about Lena, who was also one of her inspirations."

After singing with legendary pianist Dick Hyman at the Siletz Bay Music Festival in Oregon, Clairdee was invited by Hyman to perform for his 90th birthday celebration at the 2017 Sarasota Jazz Festival. "I was honored and thrilled when he asked me if he could write a song for me. We debuted 'Clairdee, That's Me' at that concert. What I enjoy most about working with Dick is the challenge of learning his compositions and arrangements. His work stretches you and pushes you to go outside of your wheelhouse."

In the email announcing *A Love Letter to Lena's* Grammy consideration, there is a quote from Hyman calling the album, "a remarkable document. It is more than a recording, it is a testament!"

ABOUT NJJS

Founded in 1972, The New Jersey Jazz Society has diligently maintained its mission to promote and preserve America's great art form - jazz.

To accomplish our mission, we produce a bi-monthly magazine, *Jersey Jazz*; sponsor live jazz events; and provide scholarships to New Jersey college students studying jazz. Through our outreach program Generations of Jazz, we provide interactive programs focused on the history of jazz.

The Society is run by a board of directors who meet monthly to conduct Society business. NJJS membership is comprised of jazz devotees from all parts of the state, the country and the world.

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