

**BIZET:**  
**CARMEN IN JAZZ**  
John Ellis Quartet

John Ellis, Saxophones and bass clarinet  
Gary Versace, Piano  
Reuben Rogers, Bass  
Jason Marsalis, Drums

- |                |      |               |      |
|----------------|------|---------------|------|
| 1. Habanera    | 5:05 | 4. Toreador   | 6:34 |
| 2. Seguidilla  | 8:53 | 5. Gypsy Song | 7:13 |
| 3. Flower Song | 7:31 | 6. Card Song  | 7:31 |

All songs composed by Georges Bizet  
All songs arranged by John Ellis

Recorded by Andy Taub at Brooklyn Recording in Brooklyn, New York, on September 13-14, 2021  
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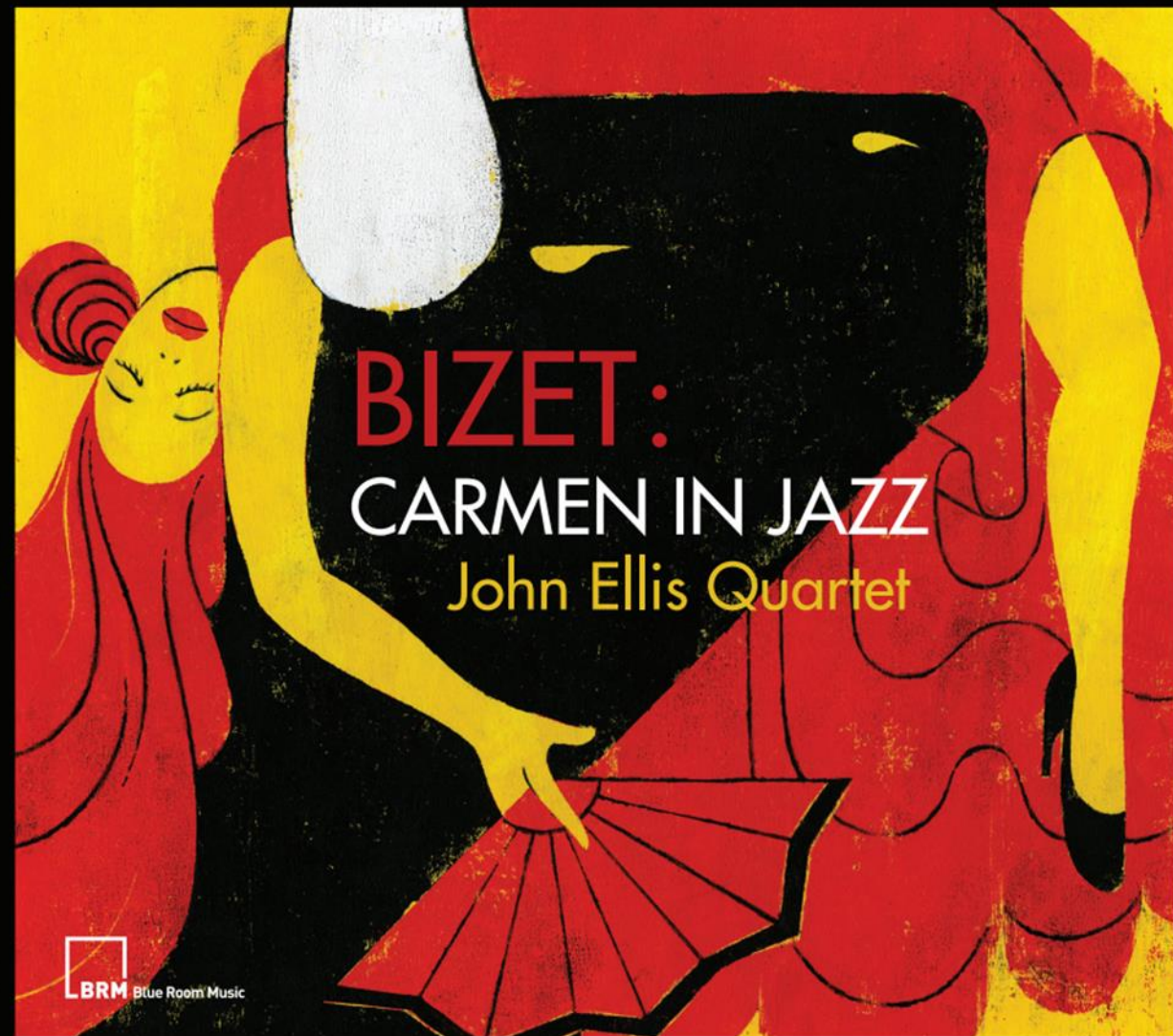


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## BIZET: CARMEN IN JAZZ

### John Ellis Quartet

John Ellis, one of the most sought-after saxophonists and multi-reedists of his generation, has had ample opportunity to write for longform compositional settings. His chamber-jazz ensemble works *The Ice Siren* and *MOBRO* are quasi-operatic, you might say. But when it came time to deal with George Bizet's *Carmen* — not simply an opera but one of the most widely known scores in the entire Western canon — Ellis saw the task as one of scaling down. He would focus on the music, less on the exoticized “gypsy” narrative. And he'd do it from a jazz quartet standpoint, enlisting a group of brilliant improvisers with distinct voices: Gary Versace on piano, Reuben Rogers on bass and Jason Marsalis on drums.

*Bizet: Carmen in Jazz* began as a commission from the St. Barts Music Festival, a high-level classical confab with some jazz in the mix. Ellis, a rural North Carolina native, was a repeat invitee, a celebrated artist whose musical coming-of-age took place in New Orleans. The French and Spanish cultural nexus, so integral to the Crescent City, is of course a main ingredient in *Carmen* from start to finish.

In early 2020, St. Barts staged its festival with an all-*Carmen* theme. Organizers wisely turned to Ellis for the jazz component. Reuben Rogers hails from St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, regionally close to St. Barts (Barthélemy). Jason Marsalis, youngest brother of Wynton and Branford, a seasoned drummer and vibraphonist in his mid-40s at this writing, shares not only the New Orleans connection but also a family name that is synonymous with classical and jazz boundary-crossing. Versace is one of jazz's finest pianists but a highly accomplished organist and accordionist as well (the accordion being common in merengue and other Caribbean genres).

For instrumentation, Ellis kept it simple: mainly tenor sax with acoustic piano, bass and drums. Ellis is the only one doubling, as he's done brilliantly on his own projects and in bands led by Rudy Royston, Alan Ferber, Darcy James Argue, Kendrick Scott, Helen Sung, Michael Leonhart and more. “*Habanera*” is a bright and bouncy soprano sax feature. “*Toreador*” has tenor on the initial minor-key theme, but soprano on the major-key swing section — a structure, Ellis notes, that corresponds to the New Orleans “second line” tradition. Rogers' strong “*Toreador*” bass solo leads to a change of tempo via Marsalis on snare drum, in classic second line fashion.

Rogers has an even more pronounced solo on “*Seguidilla*,” a crowd-pleaser with a tight multilayered arrangement and wry false ending. Ellis's premature cadenza, on tenor sax, could be described as downright operatic. “*Card Song*,” in contrast, is a vehicle for his sumptuous and highly refined bass clarinet, all the more striking in the absence of drums. “*Gypsy Song*” is pure tenor sax elegance, with deftly handled mixed meter and a feeling of calm release on the “*Tra-la-la*” main melody. “*Flower Song*,” the one aria on the album for the male tenor role (Don José), is an affecting tenor sax-piano duo, with a hint of a folk or gospel flavor. In *St. Barts* it was performed by the full quartet; the duo version was an in-studio epiphany.

Bizet's music is amenable to all these arranging strategies, and to the input of Ellis, Versace, Rogers and Marsalis as jazz improvisers who show up to play. In fact, to say the material translates well is an understatement: the rhythmic motif of “*Habanera*,” after all, is what scholar Ned Sublette calls “the signature Antillean beat to this day”:

“It's the rhythm of the aria Bizet wrote for the cigarette-rolling *Carmen* to sing (though he lifted the melody from Basque composer Sebastián Yradier), and it's the defining rhythm of reggaeton. You can hear it in the contemporary music of Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico, to say nothing of the nineteenth-century Cuban *contradanza*. It's Jelly Roll Morton's oft-cited ‘Spanish tinge,’ it's the accompaniment figure to W. C. Handy's ‘*St. Louis Blues*,’ and you hear it from brass bands at a second line in New Orleans today.” (Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square*)

The musical and historical connections are intrinsic, which is why *Bizet: Carmen in Jazz* sounds so completely unforced. Ellis and the quartet get it, but more importantly, so do the listeners. “We played for a French-speaking audience in St. Barts and it was exciting to see the response to what we did with this repertoire,” Ellis recalls. “The music is so popular, so there's already this point of connection with people. It went over incredibly well, and I knew it was something I wanted to document.”

— David R. Adler

#### John Ellis Thanks to:

“Special thanks to Frances and Jill DeBroff and the St. Barts Music Festival.

And extra thanks to Robert Sadin, whose tireless guidance and mentorship made this project possible.”

[www.johnaxsonellis.com](http://www.johnaxsonellis.com)

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