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A Listening Session With Bria Skonberg

All that hot, swingin' stuff

UPDATED APRIL 25, 2019 – DAVID R. ADLER

Bria Skonberg (photo: Carolina Palmgren)

Trumpeter and vocalist Bria Skonberg has used the term "trad fusion" to describe her music: steeped in the swing and vivacity of '20s and '30s "hot" jazz, yet shaped by a range of other aesthetics in jazz, modern pop and beyond. The British Columbia native has gained increasing acclaim since moving to New York, cofounding the spirited New York Hot Jazz Festival and steadily releasing eclectic albums as a bandleader, including *Fresh* (2009), *So Is the Day* (2012) and *Into Your Own* (2014). These recordings find her performing originals, standards and arrangements of gems by Joni Mitchell, the Beatles, Janis Joplin, the Cardigans, Stevie Wonder and more. Her newest offering, Bria, produced by Matt Pierson, marks her Sony Masterworks debut and features pianist Aaron Diehl, bassist Reginald Veal, drummer Ali Jackson and guests.

Breaking away from her teaching duties at the Juilliard Jazz Academy on a sweltering mid-July day, Skonberg, 32, generously lent *JazzTimes* her ears and shared her thoughts about music spanning nearly a century.

1. Clarence Williams Blue Five

"Changeable Daddy of Mine" (OKeh). Williams, piano;

Margaret Johnson, vocals; Louis Armstrong, cornet; Aaron Thompson, trombone; Buddy Christian, banjo. Recorded in 1924.

BEFORE: Yeah! I've never heard that song. I'm trying to pick out an era for it. I can't figure out who that singer is-it's right in that Mildred Bailey [style], kind of.

AFTER: OK! I'm learning a lot here, great! [*sings the double-time trumpet line in the final solo*] Right there, I was thinking [it was Armstrong].

There's a great group in New Orleans now called Tuba Skinny, and this reminded me of them. They have a singer named Erika Lewis. They've got a great cornet player named Shaye Cohn. She's the daughter of guitarist Joe Cohn; she plays violin and piano too. This track made me think of them. I like that it's got the old-time blues aspect and yet [it reflects] that time in New York when they were adding that sense of urgency to the music, going back and forth with those different tempo changes. Those were some of the things I noticed.

2. The EarRegulars

"New Orleans Stomp" (from *In the Land of Beginning Again*, Jazzology). Jon-Erik Kellso, trumpet; Evan Christopher, clarinet; Matt Munisteri, guitar; Kerry Lewis, bass. Recorded in 2015.

BEFORE: Could be Warren Vaché. Wait. Kellso? It's the EarRegulars. It sounds like he's playing trumpet and I'm not always used to that because he played the Puje [cornet/trumpet hybrid, pronounced "pudgy"] for a long time. Is this with Evan-the new album?

Kellso is one of my biggest idols. I met him in 2002 on the West Coast. I might have been 17 or 18, and after that he started to send me recordings-he sent me *The Aviator* soundtrack with Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks. I still lived in Vancouver at that time. It was very inspiring, to say the least. Evan and I met around the same time. Same sort of thing: It was just so cool to see these younger guys playing this kind of music, having a great time. Duke Heitger's in that category, from New Orleans. He's of the same ilk.

There's a raspiness to Kellso's sound. Meeting him introduced me to that sound. He emulated Ruby Braff; they have that rasp that I really fell in love with.

Is that something you've emulated in turn?

Yeah, actually. That's the sound that I really like, and it often comes from cornet players.

This band's got a great time feel.

Yeah! Matt Munisteri! All those guys, coming together at the Ear Inn [in Manhattan]. … [Musicians] come to play that gig, and even if none of the bandleaders are there, they respect it. They come with a sense of "OK, we're gonna make some real music, we're gonna make it fun, classy, spontaneous."

3. Cécile McLorin Salvant

"What's the Matter Now?" (from *For One to Love*, Mack Avenue). Salvant, vocals; Aaron Diehl, piano; Paul Sikivie, bass; Lawrence Leathers, drums. Recorded in 2015.

BEFORE: [*immediately*] It's Cécile. With Aaron Diehl. I met Cécile in France in 2008 or so, because I spent a lot of time over there making music with friends. She ended up sitting in with my band at a very small bar in the South of France, before she moved to New York. She's wonderful. I love this album.

It's cool, the relationship that she and Aaron have musically. I think they met each other at the perfect time to make that music happen, which obviously is magical.

How about Aaron's role on your forthcoming album?

It's exciting. The album was crowdfunded, recorded and then it got picked up by Sony. I'm sure [the presence of Diehl and] those guys had a lot to do with it. The problem now is, are they all available to tour? I'll take what I can get. [*laughs*]

4. Gene Krupa & His Orchestra

"Let Me Off Uptown" (OKeh). Krupa, drums; Roy Eldridge, trumpet/vocals; Anita O'Day, vocals; with big-band horn and rhythm sections. Recorded in 1941.

BEFORE: [*sings along with the reed-section riff as soon as it starts*] Gene Krupa Orchestra. When I hear this song in my head I don't think of it being this relaxed. [*mimics the O'Day/Eldridge banter, then Krupa's loud snare-drum crack before O'Day sings*] I love that there's a resurgence of drummer-led bands. These leaders, they give that energy to the band, they know how to drop bombs in places that are really effective. I saw Jamison Ross' show recently, and it was so great to see a drummer who could build the drama however he wanted. You're never like, "Hey, stay and play under the vocal!"

I love this song for many reasons. I did a show several years ago called "Brass and Belles," and I did a collection of vocalists that were paired with trumpet players, but I couldn't figure out how to do that patter [on this song] very well. "Hey Bria, how's it goin'?" "Oh, ya know, I'm doin' OK!" Which is probably how I speak to myself. [*laughs*] So I just used the song to introduce the band. [*listens to Eldridge's trumpet solo*]

Has Eldridge been influential for you?

Yeah! Louis has been my favorite for a long time, but everybody around that era. Charlie Shavers is one of my all-time favorites. Roy's "Heckler's Hop" and all that stuff, it epitomized really hot, swingin' stuff. Total fire, searing.

5. Doc Cheatham & Nicholas Payton

"Dinah" (from *Doc Cheatham & Nicholas Payton*, Verve). Cheatham, trumpet/vocals; Payton, trumpet; Les Muscutt, guitar; Butch Thompson, piano; Bill Huntington, bass; Ernie Elly, drums. Recorded in 1997.

BEFORE: [*listens to Cheatham's vocal on the verse*] Who is that? [*listens to the main body of the song*] Warren? It's funny because I probably know all these guys. Is it Marty Grosz?

AFTER: Oh! Oh, yeah!

I picked this because it's in the idiom but also because you've worked with Payton in his Television Studio Orchestra.

That was a really awesome opportunity that happened within six months of me moving to New York. Getting a chance to listen to Nicholas play for that many days was just awesome. He had a sound that he was going for that blended R&B and jazz. That's probably why I started using percussion around that time. There were times when, instead of a saxophonist, if I had a quintet I'd get a percussionist. It would open up a lot of ideas.

And Payton is a singing trumpeter like yourself.

Sure! I think everybody should sing. It helps you learn the melodies, internalize the songs, get inside them and, if you write music, writing lyrics is a very satisfying thing to do. And singing is good for air support.

It must be physically demanding to sing and play a horn.

Sure, but I think they're complementary. They inform each other.

6. Catherine Russell

"I'm Checkin' Out, Goom'bye" (from *Strictly Romancin'*, World Village). Russell, vocals; Jon-Erik Kellso, trumpet, horn arrangement; John Allred, trombone; Dan Block, alto saxophone; Andy Farber, tenor saxophone; Matt Munisteri, guitar; Mark Shane, piano; Lee Hudson, bass; Mark McLean, drums. Recorded in 2011.

BEFORE: [*immediately*] It's Cat. She's awesome. She uses Mark Shane a lot on piano, and Matt Munisteri again. Is Kellso on this?

She's wonderful. We've crossed paths a bunch. I started the NY Hot Jazz Camp down in Greenwich Village this year, and we chose Cat for the vocal instructor. She was so awesome-just so positive, so prepared, and she had never been in that kind of situation before. If you've ever spent time with Cat or watched her perform, you just fall in love with her.

Her recent Sy Oliver vocal project at Jazz at Lincoln Center was great.

The reed player in that band, Evan Arntzen, he's been my musical brother for 15 years. I talked him into moving to New York, and he's kicking butt.

7. The Fat Babies

"Snake Rag" (from *Chicago Hot*, Delmark). Andy Schumm, cornet; Dave Bock, trombone; John Otto, clarinet, saxophone; Jake Sanders, tenor banjo; Paul Asaro, piano; Beau Sample, bass; Alex Hall, drums. Recorded in 2012.

BEFORE: [*sings glissando trombone break*] "Snake Rag." [listens at length]

Hint: This band is not from New York.

Chicago? It brings to mind Jimmy McPartland and those guys.

AFTER: Sure, those guys! I haven't seen those guys live yet. I'm going back to Chicago. I know Andy Schumm. The Fat Babies and Tuba Skinny, as far as bands playing stuff in that authentic vein, they're pretty amazing. Who else is on that? Jake, the banjo player! He used to live in New York. This band is a priority the next time I'm in Chicago.

8. Ghost Train Orchestra

"You Ain't the One" (from *Hot Town*, Accurate). Brian Carpenter, trumpet; Curtis Hasselbring, trombone; Andy Laster, alto and baritone saxophones; Petr Cancura, tenor saxophone, clarinet; Dennis Lichtman, clarinet; Cynthia Sayer, banjo; Mazz Swift, violin, vocals; Jordan Voelker, viola; Ron Caswell, tuba; Rob Garcia, drums. Recorded in 2013.

BEFORE: It's the Nighthawks. No? [*listens at length*] Is it a New Orleans-based band? The tuba player is *great*.

AFTER: Oh, snap, those guys! Brian Carpenter, of course! Mazz Swift-oh, that's wonderful. I've seen these guys live but I haven't heard this record. Yeah, that makes sense. I was thinking, "Who's got a violin?" Super-respect for those guys and gals.

9. Jane Monheit

"Something's Gotta Give" (from *The Songbook Sessions:*

Ella Fitzgerald, Emerald City). Monheit, vocals; Nicholas Payton, trumpet; Michael Kanan, piano; Neal Miner, bass; Rick Montalbano, drums; Daniel Sadownick, percussion. Recorded in 2013.

BEFORE: [*listens to the opening rhythmic pattern*] Ooh. [*after a few seconds of the vocal*] Is it Jane Monheit?

So who does she have on trumpet?

Hint: He produced the record.

Michael Leonhart? It sounds modern. [*listens intently to trumpet solo*]

AFTER: I was going to guess Payton. I should know, but I didn't know that he and Jane worked together.

I didn't know either until this record came out. Do you know Jane?

Not personally. She does a lot of stuff at Birdland and I've seen her, but I'm not sure I'm on her radar or what. No, we haven't broken bread yet.

Apparently I'm a little better at naming vocalists than trumpet players, unless it's Kellso. [*laughs*]

10. Frankie Trumbauer & His Orchestra

"Futuristic Rhythm" (OKeh). Trumbauer, C melody saxophone, vocals; Bix Beiderbecke, Andy Secrest, cornets; Chester Hazlett, alto saxophone; Irving ("Izzy") Friedman, tenor saxophone; Min Leibrook, bass saxophone; Matty Malneck, violin; Snoozer Quinn, guitar; Lennie Hayton, piano; Stan King, drums. Recorded in 1929.

BEFORE: Is this Paul Whiteman?

No, but good guess.

Bass saxophone and guitar. Oh, is it a Bix thing? I'm thinking, if it's not Paul Whiteman, who else did he play with? It's definitely that era, that sound, that white swing. [*listens to Bix's cornet solo*] Yeah.

AFTER: Playing these short solos and saying something in that amount of time is quite difficult. Bix does it beautifully. It makes me think, when I get to sub into the Nighthawks it's always a joyous and terrifying experience because the solos are written out, with no chord changes. You're actually trying to read a transcribed solo on the fly, *in the style*, and so the Bix stuff, that's where I've gotten a lot of education in that music.

How often have you played in the Nighthawks?

I've subbed for Kellso 10 or 20 times over the years, and I've done concerts at the Town Hall with them.

You're always sight-reading in that band?

Always sight-reading. If I do it, I probably haven't seen the book in a month or two, and it's like ripping off a Band-Aid, kind of jumping in. I think, "OK, I'm just going to have as much fun as possible because I doubt Vince will ever call me again." [*laughs*] But he does. And I love it because I get to bring in my whole arsenal of old mutes, like Shastocks and cups and stuff, plungers.

I just saw the documentary on Sunday [*Vince Giordano: There's a Future in the Past*]. It captures somebody who works really hard all the time, and also how the guys in the band are just as much of a voice in the journey that made it happen. I feel really lucky to have been welcomed into that family.

Have you checked out Bix a lot?

Yes, but there's always more time to spend.

I love that his solo is so rooted in the melody, even when he's changing it.

I always teach people to start with the melody: Don't worry about chord scales, don't talk to me about any of that stuff right now. Play a solo off of the melody. Stretch around it.

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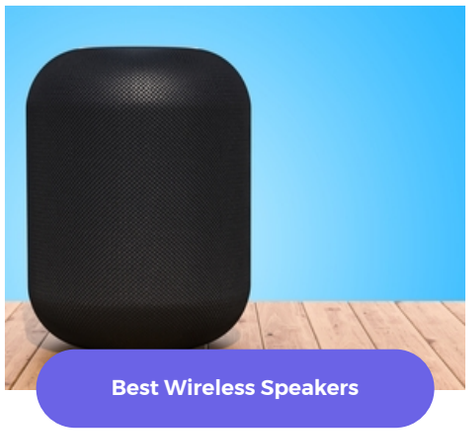

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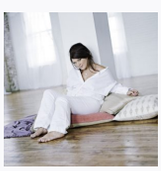

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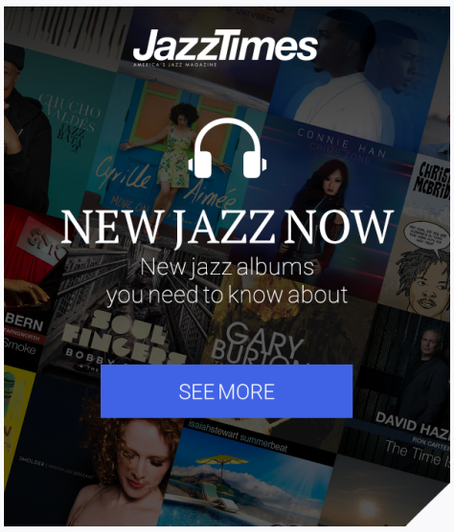

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