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Sound Advice

Tappin' and Yappin'! and Among the Stars

Here are two contrasting CDs, each with 10 tracks, as different as can be in tone and style. Each features a solo female voice with solo instrumental accompaniment. One has performances that are intentionally over the top, and the lady in question is a fictitious show biz "Big Star" with especially short tracks making for a brisk cast album. The other is cast in moonlight and is subtle, with gentle singing and song treatments, with many tracks clocking in at over four minutes, but making *Among the Stars* among the loveliest low-key albums in recent times.



TAPPIN' AND YAPPIN'!

ORIGINAL (ORLANDO, FLORIDA FRINGE) CAST

Give 'em the old razzle-dazzle, as they say in *Chicago*. There's plenty of flash and crowing in the story of a singer from Chicago who's very intent on dazzling like the most blinding of stars, but hardly seems to be the brightest light on any Christmas tree. This "star" is named Cindy Starr, the vociferant and Mermanesque

belting character who is *Tappin' and Yappin'!* her way through her star turns. As the title plainly implies, she's all about high-energy dancing and barking out her songs and patter. The camp is relatively high camp, though there's plenty of low humor. Joy Andersen bellows and stampedes through the score like a steam roller, presenting a super-peppy entertainer of uncertain fame and certain determination to give her all. Even without the visuals and plot synopsis (the packaging is without details or photos, save one on the disc itself), you can almost see the mile-wide grins—and see where it's all going. Performing doggedly, and with a style frozen in old-timey show biz time, she's an old hand who's an old ham. And she's ready for her comeback, even if we're not convinced where she came from or how far she first went.

With a "Go into your dance" M.O., where belting is everything and more, the Mack truck of a performer is personified in Joy Andersen's relentless portrayal. It's fun. Wound up tightly, and exploding through the quick-paced, zingy numbers that mostly last less than two minutes, she makes the character a no-frills hoot. Composer-lyricist-bookwriter John deHaas (*Halloween*, plus musical-directing/playing shows of all kinds in theatres, Walt Disney World, cruise ships, etc.) is at the keys, growling out some lines here and there in character as the diva's showy but maybe not so patient maestro, Johnnie Ivories. His tempi and snazzy or mock-workmanlike accompaniment captures a Vegas lounge or hyped-up TV musical special of yore. The humor is about as dry as Niagara Falls, and just as subtle in its impact. She might remind you of early Bette Midler. Singing, she might remind you of a maybe *too* eager to please broad vaudevillian. "When I'm feeling low, I shuffle off to Buffalo, and tap-tap-tap my way through life!" proclaims the title song, mindlessly perky (on purpose, of course—the winks are big, too). Singing the praises of a dancer's most important asset in "Gams," the antics are in spunky mode ("Not thick and stuffy like Virginia hams ... as patriotic as Uncle Sam ... they served two tours in Vietnam!...").

While some of the joshing is affectionate parody of perky song-and-dance numbers feeling G-rated generic, the Christmas song (simply titled, you guessed it, "Christmas Song") is all about genitalia instead. The double-entendre, single-minded (simple-minded?) wishes of the sex-starved woman are sung with glee, similar to the odes to joy of entertaining on stage. She's apparently as horny as she is happy. Some will be amused, some will find it rather a kind of "junior high" humor low point, but it's perhaps as tame as it is lame. In "Rat-a-Tat Tap," the ever-upbeat chanteuse, in tap shoes and in denial, tells of her

serviceman in dancing denial sings of her serviceman love interest who shows no interest in her, but she apparently prefers to not see signs of his sexual preference.

The seeming relentlessness is relieved with a brief would-be thoughtful reprise of "Pull Back and Smile" and Shawn Walsh joining the party for some welcome less frantic vocals on "Good Girl Cindy." If it's short on sophistication and short on the sly sting of a brilliantly polished characterization such as Dame Edna, *Tappin' and Yappin'!* doesn't seem to pretend to be anything other than a vamping homage with a dash of vinegar.



KELLEY SUTENFIELD & TONY ROMANO AMONG THE STARS

And now for something mature, delicate and suave. Kelley Sutenfield is a vocalist I've had on my radar for a while now, and guitarist Tony Romano has shown himself to be one of those accompanists in the "Who needs anyone else?" category. And happily, romantically, that's all we get—just the two of them—so

we can concentrate on and relish each one's very full gifts of communication. Co-stars here, they are both storytellers with song. The appealingly breathy singer carries intelligence singer carries brilliance to her readings of familiar lyrics and the guitarist complements her, sharing the responsibility for mood-establishment and sustaining. They both know how to "play the silences." A pause that draws attention to a word or creates tension is a song's best friend here and raises the stakes by lowering the flame. It's immediately apparent with the thoughtful, slow take on the opener, a truly romantic and involved "Fly Me to the Moon" that floats rather than swings. When she holds onto a word (like the unusual phrasing on "all I long for, all I worship" (pause), then the unusual choice to stretch out the word "and" to "annnnnd" so that the other verb, "adore," stands out as distinct rather than a throwaway redundancy. (The only carelessness comes from whoever put the packaging together, identifying the classic's composer-lyricist as Howard Bart instead of Bart Howard.) Throughout these readings, we often are in a time-suspension mini-holding pattern, giving a touch of amazement and weight to the wait for might well be (otherwise) ordinary. The effect is simply—perhaps surprisingly—magical. The guitar never rushes her, holds her back, or anticipates. They're right there, together moment by moment. And the moon enchantment continues immediately with a selection from decades later, 1992's Neil Young-written gem, the ingratiating "Harvest Moon."

Oklahoma!'s "People Will Say We're in Love" also takes its time, maybe a touch too much at first, losing the sweep of its melody and its unique warning and "disclaimer" status. Still, it's marvelous to hear them wrap their loving ways around a true Broadway classic. Although rarely light, *Among the Stars* shines; it's languid without being dull or turgid. Treatments are refreshing: "Beautiful Love" can be weighty and formal, but is more free and casual here. "Just Say I Love Him [Her]" is reinvented. Based on a Neapolitan song, and favored by Italian singers (with the Americanized stage names Johnny Desmond, Dean Martin, Connie Francis, etc.), it had been pretty much relegated to the over-sung schlockpile. Here, it's fragile and understated.

Also arresting and commanding attention by a tempo switch and making a breezy lyric something articulate is the Carole King/Gerry Goffin pop ditty "One Fine Day," minus the bounce it has had from its early life through its representation in Broadway's *Beautiful*. Who knew this kind of sassy song could slow down and grow up to be so pensive?

Unlike some guitarists, Tony Romano is equally effective as spotlight-sharing accompanist and soloist. The instrumental breaks are respectful of melody and intent, without being slavishly so. Instead, they embellish and expand the story when he stretches out, strums, plays single notes like pearls strung one by precious one. Likewise, Kelley's phrasing brings out much in the stories, with her small liberties in notes enhancing things. The clearest example is the most literal: In "Until It's Time for You to Go," she bends the notes on the line comparing her romantic open-mindedness to the flexibility of a willow: "I can bend."

Here and there, the voice tends to distractingly almost *whisper* a hushed phrase-ending note when a more open-voweled crooning approach might enhance the prettiness to more heights of exquisiteness. But there's so much to admire and be swept away by.

While those who insist that variety is the spice of all musical life may gripe about the ballad-heavy sameness of flavors here, there is only one real danger as I hear it. That is that *Among the Stars* is so even and lovely that some might be tempted to relegate it to relaxing, late-night adult lullaby function. It would be a great loss not to gain the insights provided into the material by the loving care and intelligence. It's all there. Just listen.

- Rob Lester

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