



Continuing Saga of ARRIVING

TIERNEY SUTTON
CONFRONTS THE
CHALLENGE OF
BUILDING A
SINGING CAREER
ON THE WEST
COAST

Tierney Sutton seems to be perpetually emerging. But she's been on the jazz scene long enough to have witnessed her very job description morphing around her.

It's an age when jazz vocal esthetics have been freely sidling up against pop. Make no mistake, though: Sutton has always been in avid pursuit of life as a jazz singer.

As heard on her five albums for Telarc, going back to 2000's *Unsung Heroes*, Sutton has been almost strictly devoted to such old-school values as bowing at the altar of the Great American Songbook, refining one's craft, working closely with the band and keeping close tabs on what it means to be a virtuoso. She has a sure command of tools and effects, giving cool painterly treatments to ballads and stretching out on gymnastic uptempo workouts. Her tone is lucid, her intonation solid and her improvisational senses keen, without resorting to empty showboating.

She's got the goods. Plus, Sutton knows how to work both a band and a crowd, provided the given crowd is open to her vision. Crowds were on Sutton's side for two late-afternoon recording sessions at Manhattan's Birdland in the spring to capture the goods for her first live album, *I'm With The Band*. In a sense, the crowd was carefully sculpted—through not scripted. Sutton and band had honed the material during a month-long stint at the Oak Room in the Algonquin Hotel before descending into Birdland. They planted the live recording audience with sympathetic ears, picking regulars and established fans, who seemed honored to be in the house.

At Birdland, Sutton kicked off her sets/sessions with a prayer, imploring higher powers to "maketh me a hollow reed," and then, after the prayer, wisecracked, "Play ball!" Sutton operates that way, splitting the difference between focused seriousness and a propensity for good-natured mischief, both in her patter and the way liberties are cleverly taken in arrangements cooked up all by herself and her unusually empathetic band—pianist Christian Jacob, drummer Ray Brinker and bassists Trey Henry or Kevin Axt.

Their spin on "Blue Skies" lends a contrasting emotional ambivalence to Irving Berlin's cheer-filled anthem, here wrapped in a demure package of coiled rhythmic energy and darkened harmonic colors. Sutton admits to the crowd that, of the three Berlin tunes they do here, that arrangement "may be the vibiest of them." She also notes, "For all you singers out there, it may not be good mojo to start a set with the line, 'There may be trouble ahead.'"

She introduces "The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea": "I have one goal when I sing this—that is to channel Peggy Lee." She does get to Lee's cool, clean depths, but Lee wouldn't have turned the title phrase into Silly Putty the way Sutton does at one point.

Sutton's previous project was last year's *Dancing In The Dark*, a tribute to Frank Sinatra's gift for moody balladry. But what she does with "The Lady Is A Tramp" applies modal openness to the usual

campiness of the tune: Sinatra swagger is retroed and ushered into the land of Coltrane. She points out that this version is an example of "the band's deeply held belief that if a song's been done 18,000 times, we have an obligation to render it unrecognizable."

Further proof of that approach keeps popping up in a Sutton show. Moodiness becomes their refreshed version of "Let's Face The Music And Dance," with its stewing atmosphere atop a hypnotic bass ostinato. She ups the tempo-and-chops ante in brisk vocal-drum duets with Brinker on "What A Little Moonlight Will Do" and "Surrey With The Fringe On Top." After a fairly breathless romp, she admits, "I do better when I don't have time to think. I have to be forced into a corner where my conscious mind has no time to think."

Late in the session, Sutton does another take of "If I Loved You," correcting a mistaken lyric. She asks the audience if they were aware of her errant lyrics, and several admit they did. "Rat bastards!" she says, in a loving rebuke. "We have educated fans." And as the fan base keeps growing, Sutton continues her slow-but-steady process of arriving on the scene.

A few months after the Birdland sessions, Sutton sat down for a long lunch interview in Ventura, Calif., an hour north of her home in the San Fernando Valley. Across the street is the historical San Buenaventura Mission, part of the mission system that marked the birth of California, and a sure reminder that we're not in Birdland anymore.

As Sutton sometimes says in her live shows, she's "a suburban mom in the Valley, like June Christy was." But the analogy between Sutton and Christy doesn't quite work, despite Sutton having used Christy's signature tune, "Something Cool," as the title track for her 2002 album.

"I always get a kick out of where people are coming from in jazz," Sutton says. "It's a testament to subtle racism being alive and well, because people would come up to me—when all I listened to was Nancy Wilson—and say, 'You remind me of June Christy.' I'd say, 'I don't remind you of June Christy. I'm just blonde.' They hear what they see."

The fact of Sutton's being from Los Angeles, not exactly a hotbed of jazz scene makers at the moment, has proven to be both a challenge and, in some ways, a blessing. The Wisconsin native headed east to study at Berklee in Boston, but landed in L.A. in the mid '90s, where she has been raising her son, now 8, with her husband, trombonist Alan Kaplan. Like many of L.A.'s finest musicians, Kaplan makes his living doing studio work of all stripes, but is a fine jazz player. Sutton, too, has done her share of studio work—yes, that's her affecting a Betty Boop-ish voice on a Yoplait commercial—and teaching, alongside the business of sculpting a career as a jazz singer.

By Sutton's account, the brightest lining of her West Coast base has been the ability to develop and keep a potent rapport with a top-notch band—for a dozen years and counting. "Because of a lack of recognition that L.A. jazz musicians get, there's a humility about them," she says.

Early on, as she was grooming for a musical life necessarily in the spotlight, Sutton admits that. "There was pressure from certain quadrants after our first record was made. I got some calls from different old guard, respected jazz musicians—who shall remain nameless—who felt that I should have gone with a more established, middle-of-the-road kind of trio. I knew it was nonsense. Now, everybody wants to hire my band."

Vis-a-vis the album title, Sutton is very much with her band, whose members are democratically empowered in creating arrangements. "It's extraordinary to have five people weighing in on things, people who are at such a high level," she says of the in-demand studio players. "They play different music all the time and are not interested in reinventing the wheel. They're not about making another record that sounds like other records."

Sutton obviously takes her jazz mission seriously, citing years spent as "a jazz nun." Though having lightened up with the years, she confesses, "I'm a devotee of jazz in the sense that I view it as an extremely lofty thing. I look at it as a music requiring virtuosity. All of my jazz heroes were virtuosos. There's a part of me that feels that something of what has been lost on that end of jazz."

It may come as a surprise that Sutton actually came to jazz fairly late, which may have strengthened her nun-like devotion to the music. While

studying Russian in college, her introduction to jazz came via a summer job as a singing cocktail waitress—a "Heidel Honey"—at the Heidel House in Green Lake, Wis. Backed by the house trio of organ, drums and accordion, Sutton recalls, "We did pop tunes and Broadway tunes and slaughtered them."

The upside of her musical encounter was her realization that in these show tunes were songs, "so good that even when you did them with organ and accordion and a drummer from Oshkosh, there was something about them that was good." At the same time, she heard the same material performed by the Mary Jay Trio across the street. "It was clear that what they were doing was music as art, and that what we were doing should be stopped, at all costs," Sutton says, only half-jokingly.

At Wesleyan University, Sutton hooked up with a jazz pianist looking for a singer, and he turned her onto the expansive world of the *Real Book* as well as the art of demanding excellence and invention of oneself as a jazz musician. "I was thinking, 'I've always been able to sing anything they give me, in school or in the choir. Why can I not sing this stuff unless I sit down and learn it?'" she says. "So the idea that this is music you have to actually sit down and shed is something that just happened, because the first collaborator was an instrumentalist who was telling me if I got the melodies wrong. I never changed my attitude about what jazz was after that. It's supposed to be hard."

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After a brief stint at Berklee and studies with saxophonist Jerry Bergonzi in Boston, she made her westward migration. She kicked off her recording career with the 1998 album *Introducing Tierney Sutton*, on the Dutch Challenge label. In 2000, Sutton commenced her ongoing Telarc years with *Unsung Heroes*, consisting of obscure tunes mostly connected with her instrumental jazz heroes.

The programming decision for *Unsung Heroes* amounted to something of a personal statement. "This is why people like Diana Krall or Norah Jones resonate: There's a sincerity to what they're doing," she says. "It's not contrived. At that time in my career, that was sincere to me, because that's what I was listening to, that's what was influencing me, and that's what I wanted to do."

The uncompromisingly musical angle continued with Sutton's 2001 project, *Blue In Green*, dedicated to Bill Evans. She did, however, include standards on the album. "Part of Bill Evans' thing was that accessibility," she says. "You can play Bill Evans records for people who don't really like jazz. That lyricism and the prettiness of it was so represented by him that I wanted that to be a big chunk of it. And then *Something Cool* had a lot to do with Ray Brown saying, 'Come on, Tierney, you've got to do some stuff where people know what the songs are.'"

Now 42, Sutton is aware of the shifting attitude toward age and venerability in the jazz business, especially the jazz vocal corner. "My attitude with jazz is a real craft thing—learning songs and gaining wisdom," she says. "It's a lifestyle. There's something about taking an artist at 20 and trying to make them into iconic figures that is the exact reverse of how it should be and how I've experienced jazz."

So far, Sutton's discography has been carefully plotted and gauged for freshness and diversity. Looking ahead, Sutton says, "I want to do, for lack of a better word, a 'spiritual' record. When I say 'spiritual,' I use the word loosely. It's not necessarily religious music in any way. It's just a question of what are the songs and sentiments that speak to the core issues? Nobility, joy, pain, loss of nobility, the spiritual journey, or the ego arm-wrestling that myself or anybody goes through."