



BALLROOM JAZZ SINGERS

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BY SUZANNE LORGE

Music in Schools Today has been providing in-school music programs for at-risk students in the San Francisco Bay Area for almost 20 years, having served thousands of young musicians during its tenure. MUST has an impressive list of financial supporters, board members, and creative partners; among the latter is Jazz at the Ballroom, a not-for-profit arts organization that holds salon-type jazz concerts in the ballroom of **Bing Crosby**'s former estate. Jazz at the Ballroom attracts premier jazz talent from around the U.S., and this year the organization called on some of them to record *Jazz at the Ballroom: Christmas (s/p)*, the proceeds of which support the educational music program. You'd have to be pretty Scrooge-like indeed to miss the charm of this album. Some of the best jazz musicians around, secular holiday tunes, the ghost of Bing Crosby past, a vintage Hollywood ballroom, and charitable giving to underprivileged kids? No one could be so cold.

To be clear, the majority of the album's 16 tracks were recorded in New York and its environs, and most of its featured musicians are frequent fixtures in Manhattan jazz rooms. Some standouts from the New York regulars: Singer/pianist **Freddy Cole** offering up a warm and swinging "Jack Frost Snow," bassist/singer **Nicki Parrot** joining with pianist and current artistic director at Jazz at the Ballroom **Konrad Paszkudski** on a cool, relaxed rendition of Vince Guaraldi's "Christmas Time Is Here," and pianist/singer **Champion Fulton** turning out a sultry, bluesy "What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?" The multi-talented **Tony Desare** not only sings and accompanies on several of the tracks but engineers two of them, including a tightly arranged "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town." (For what it's worth, this J.F. Coots/Haven Gillespie song is one of the biggest selling U.S. singles of all time. But the best-selling U.S. single of all time is Irving Berlin's "White Christmas," as Bing's wife, the singer **Kathryn Crosby**, explains in a spoken intro to her own gentle version of the uber-popular song.) Of the local singers on this disc, Cole is the only one performing in Manhattan this month, at Birdland on Dec. 19-25.

But Desare and Fulton will be gigging close by, at Shanghai Jazz in Madison, N.J., on Dec. 1 and 23 respectively. Fulton's gig is in fact the CD release of her own holiday album, *Christmas with Champion*, on her eponymous record label. On this release Fulton covers many of the same tunes that appear on the Ballroom-produced release; not a surprise, given the enduring popularity of tunes like "The Christmas Song" and "Winter Wonderland." But Fulton shakes up the album's roster with some surprises: Willie Nelson's "Pretty Paper"; the Spanish-language "Gracias a Dios," by Mexican songwriter Juan Gabriel (Fulton is of Mexican heritage); and one original, "Merry Merry Christmas," a simple piano-voice melody that expresses Fulton's wish to her fans for the season.

Last month, the day before he turned 82, trombonist Roswell Rudd released *Embrace* (Rare Noise Records), an album of Songbook classics featuring vocalist **Fay Victor**, at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola. A long list of stellar jazz musicians showed up to perform in honor of Rudd that evening, including three very different kinds of singers—besides Victor, **Sheila Jordan**, who recorded with Rudd in the 1970s, and **Heather Masse**, who released an album with him last year. On *Embrace* Victor and Rudd are about as straight-ahead as you're ever going to hear these two avant garde artists, but you'd have to do a lot of listening to fully grasp the musical reach of these two. To start, catch Victor this month at Roulette on Dec. 6, Sista's Place on Dec. 16, Clemente Soto Velez on Dec. 17, Barbes on Dec. 26, and 55 Bar on Dec. 28.

For those looking to escape the chill, Symphony Space will be serving up its annual New York Hot Jazz Festival, a music marathon that this year celebrates New Orleans' contribution to jazz. Day one, *The Big Easy on the Hudson*, starts on Dec. 13 with **The Hot Sardines**, a horn-driven big band fronted by singer **Elizabeth Bougerol**; the group will be back from a gig at Jazz at the Ballroom on Dec. 10. Day two, *Storyville Stomp: Last Night in Storyville*, brings three indomitable blues singers to the stage on Dec. 16: **Mara Kaye**, **Queen Esther**, and **Blind Boy Paxton**.

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