

SINGERS WHO NEVER STOP

BY SUZANNE LORGE

On “Alone Together”, the title cut from **Catherine Russell’s** new release, the singer sticks close to the melody, in tight formation with her band—a rhythm section and panoply of horns. Her vocal tone is resonant and buttery and delivery hits the sweet spot between passion and detachment. Perfect. This tune exemplifies Russell’s talent for rendering just about any jazz number, whether a known standard (“How Deep Is The Ocean”) or an obscure novelty song (“He May Be Your Dog But He’s Wearing My Collar”), into a relatable listen for most modern audiences—a talent that has earned her TV and film work high acclaim (a Grammy for *Boardwalk Empire*) and made her a go-to backing singer for legions of pop acts. Both of the aforementioned tracks are on the new album, her seventh as a leader. She culls her material from Swing Era jazz, focusing on songs that engage her both harmonically and textually but the allure of Russell’s renditions lies in her assured way with a groove and understated ornamentation, pointing the listener in just the right direction. Again, perfect.

In 1992 acclaimed vocalist **Betty Carter** sang in a concert at the then-recently inaugurated Jazz at Lincoln

Center, dubbed “The Music Never Stops”. For the concert she used three trios, a large horn ensemble and a string section, moving masterfully among these different vocal settings and through an array of ever-shifting feels—swing, big band, bebop. Carter’s performance that evening sparkles with alacrity and precision, from her whip-fast lyrics on “Tight” to the extended interplay of her medley, “Why Him?/Where or When/What’s New?”; in this one performance Carter summarizes what makes jazz singers unique among musicians—the ability to bring words to life in the crucible of the jazz band. And she filled her bands that night with the most electric musicians around, among them pianists Cyrus Chestnut and Geri Allen, drummers Kenny Washington and Greg Hutchinson and trombonists Robin Eubanks and Art Baron. Blue Engine Records will release a recording of that event and by that name on Mar 29th, 27 years to the day after the concert. This historically significant album—comprising all never-before released performances—represents Carter’s first posthumous recording since her death in 1998 at age 69.

When Italian singer **Diana Torti** first heard Jeanne Lee she had an epiphany: singers could explore the uncharted terrain of free material too. Torti, an imaginative improviser who responds easily to musical impulse in the moment, just released her sixth album, *On A Cloud* (SLAM), featuring classical guitarist Sabino de Bari accompanying her on standards (“Honeysuckle

Rose”) and originals inspired by Lee’s work (“Fireflies”). Torti’s fresh sound—open and lilting—pays a notable homage to Lee’s vocal tradition in what would have been the singer and poet’s 80th birthday year. In explaining her fascination with Lee, Torti writes, “We should revisit her story, hoping to see the reissue of some of the albums where she has collaborated—the beauty of sharing will be enriched with further treasures.” Torti’s new release goes a long way toward that enrichment.

Singer **Kristen Lee Sergeant’s** debut album *Inside Out* (Whaling City Sound) garnered international attention for her inventive arrangements, strong storytelling and rich vocal sound. Her followup to that success, *Smolder* (s/r), promises to push her rise even further. The 10 tracks—mostly standards with some ‘80s pop and one original—crackle with warmth and feeling. Sergeant launches the new record at Birdland Theater (Mar. 26th), backed by a high-powered band that includes pianist Helen Sung, bassist Cameron Brown and saxophonist Ted Nash.

Gig notes: **Tierney Sutton** surprises fans with a newly scheduled show at the fabled Café Carlyle (Mar 19th-23rd); **Theo Bleckmann** sings four times this month—at Saint Peter’s Church (Mar. 10th and 17th), The Jazz Gallery (Mar. 26th) and Brooklyn Public Library Central Branch’s Dweck Center (Mar. 31st); and **Alexis Cole** continues her Sunday supper residency at Smoke for all of March. ❖