

DEFIANCE

BY SUZANNE LORGE

Last year, vocalist **Veronica Swift** did a radio interview with Eric Jackson for WGBH in Boston, a few months before the legendary broadcast journalist passed away. During their chat, the discussion turned to the topic of the singer's radical eclecticism.

"My music-making is not confined. I don't confine myself to stylistic things," she explained. "Instead, if I'm writing or singing, I let the song dictate what happens stylistically." The example she gives is "Don't Rain on My Parade" (from *Funny Girl*). To Swift, this is a punk rock tune, all middle fingers in the air; when she sings it with a jackhammer drum line and distorted vocals, the sound serves the tune's story. And, Swift asserts, she's a storyteller first, before she's a musician. The term she uses to describe her approach to music is "trans-genre," meaning across or beyond genre. Or, simply, defying classification.

Swift's upcoming third album, *TransGenre* (Mack Avenue), exemplifies her ideology. The album opens with Swift scatting masterfully atop a swinging high hat, before segueing into the head of "I Am What I Am" (from the Broadway musical *La Cage aux Folles*). The major gear shift comes midway through, during the solo breaks, when she cavorts with piano in a baroque

fugue for a bit before the swing returns. (To hear for yourself, look for the teaser track of "I Am What I Am", available this month as a single.) The whole album is full of stylistic U-turns like this. Nine Inch Nails' "Closer" is framed as a soul burner and moves in and out of bebop riffs. Ellington's "Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me" is a big band chart featuring bluesy electric guitar and gravelly, retro vocals. There's a French chanson treatment of Charles Gounod's aria for lyric soprano, "Je Veux Vivre" from the opera *Roméo et Juliette*, which offers a musette vocalese section. A rendition of Queen's debut single, "Keep Yourself Alive", culminates as a Scott Joplin-esque rock-blues anthem. And, of course, there's the aforementioned punk version of the Barbra Streisand hit.

Two Swift originals also appear on the set list: "Severed Heads", a lilting, cheery duet with a comic dark undertone (longtime friend Austin Patterson assists) and "In the Moonlight", a simple ballad atop Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata", which hits a feverish note before settling down again. Needless to say, Swift brings top-notch musicianship to each of these tunes, regardless of where they land on the trans-genre spectrum. She can do it all, it seems, so why would she not?

Like Swift, Aut Records in Germany is a proponent of genre defiance, though its artists apply the concept differently. Listen to *An Artist's Life Manifesto*, a recent release from the label by Italian singer **Valentina Fin** on which she uses the beauty of her voice and avant garde improvisation to dig into emotional truths that transcend

any particular formal structure—it's captivating stuff.

Which isn't to suggest that artistic confrontation can't appear in more conventional stylistic attire. Take **Diana Torti**, another naturally gifted Italian singer. On *It's All We Have* (Tambora Music), her latest album, she doesn't hesitate to use her lyrics—self-penned or otherwise—to call attention to social justice issues. Because, as she sings on "Beyond Clouds": "Tears speak louder through joined hands."

Or consider **Lucy Yeghiazaryan**, who placed in the top ten of the 2015 Thelonious Monk Competition (the year that Swift came in second). Growing up in post-Soviet Armenia, Yeghiazaryan learned jazz—and singing in English—by listening to her father's "once-contraband" jazz records. Today her NY-based career is soaring. Most recently, she contributed vocals to *With Roses* (Triangle 7), saxophonist Harry Allen's new big band record of all originals. Her cool stance towards the material speaks to her hard-won confidence as a singer, whether on a traditional swing number ("It All Catches Up With You in the End"), a sultry bossa ("Takes a Moment"), a catchy odd-meter tune ("Be the One") or a vulnerable ballad, like the title cut. Yeghiazaryan will appear at Mezzrow Aug. 10 and at Joe's Pub Aug. 11.

Summer outings: vocal powerhouse **Allan Harris** will introduce *Live at Blue Llama Jazz Club* at Smoke Aug. 3. **Queen Esther** conjures the '20s at the annual Jazz Age Lawn Party on Governors Island Aug. 12-13. And **Dianne Reeves** headlines Charlie Parker Jazz Festival in a free outdoor concert at Marcus Garvey Park Aug. 25.