

Carolyn Leonhart

Talent cannot be taught. It's something that can be fostered, but when push comes to shove, there has to be that special gift inside a person. Most jazz musicians in this day come up through the conservatory or music school route, where that talent is fostered in the safe environs of a classroom.

Carolyn Leonhart went a different route. The child of noted jazz bassist Jay Leonhart and singer Donna, Carolyn grew up in a house filled with music. By the time she was a voice major at the famed LaGuardia High School for Music and The Arts, she was spending her days as a featured vocalist in their award winning gospel choir and her evenings working on jazz standards with her father and her brother. "I was very lucky I was born into jazz," Leonhart says. "There was practically a rhythm section in my house at all times. All I had to do was sing. I could just ask them to play something and they could do it". Her voice quickly impressed many people, but her father was the toughest nut to crack. Leonhart recalls sitting in with her dad at the fabled Blue Note jazz club when she was 16. "He would start changing keys while I was singing just for the hell of it, forcing me to follow him," Leonhart recalls, now laughing about it. "I was completely annoyed at the time, but later on I realized how lucky I was to have had that kind of experience. He was testing me. You had to know what you were doing, or get off stage."

Carolyn's intimate and soulful voice has a broad tonal palette, rich textures and pure musicality and has been recognized countless times over the years. She has won awards such as Downbeat Magazine's Best College Jazz Vocalist as well as third place in the Thelonious Monk International Vocal Jazz Competition. Her voice also reflects the quality of the musicians she's played with, which has happened most notably in the band Steely Dan, where she has been the lead back-up vocalist for three world tours, two albums (including the multi-Grammy award winning *Two Against Nature*), and is featured on *Everything Must Go's* "Pixeleen".

Carolyn has versatility that many singers can only dream of, but her first love has always been jazz. In 2000 she released her critically acclaimed debut, *Steal the Moon* (Sunnyside). "Since recording *Steal the Moon*, I've been listening to instrumentalists more than singers," she says. "I've started to think more as an arranger and composer, rather than just a singer". Her influences as of late have ranged from Wayne Shorter and Woody Shaw to the groups of Miles Davis and John Coltrane.

The past few years have allowed her to develop her own group sound. She has been performing regularly with her jazz group and started the Sunday Vocalist Series at Smoke jazz Club. She has been a guest vocalist on several instrumentalists' albums, a featured guest with house rhythm sections in clubs and festivals throughout the country, and in July 2003 was on the cover of the *Jazziz* Magazine's women's issue, spotlighting notable up-and-coming singers. Carolyn has also been working with the Switzerland-based pop/lounge group Lyn Leon as lead vocalist and co-writer. Their CD, *Glass Lounge*, was released in Germany in 2004 and in late fall, the band toured Europe with Al Jarreau, who brought Carolyn on stage every night for a duet.

"I love so many different styles of music, and they have all influenced how I view 'Jazz'. To me, Jazz is a deep commitment to an ever-changing path of creativity that constantly challenges you to explore new roads..." Carolyn's new level of expression can be heard on her new CD, *New 8th Day*, which features Leonhart and her working band: husband Wayne Escoffery on tenor saxophone, pianist Rick Germanson on piano, bassist Hans Glawischnig, and drummers Donald Edwards and Jason Brown. "*New 8th Day* is a collection of songs I've written or rediscovered, based on their lyrics. But it really represents a new beginning for me, because I am finally starting to bring all of my musical experiences together to create music that is wholly representative of me."

One of those rare singers who thinks like a musician and is able to push herself just as instrumentalists do, Carolyn Leonhart stands out in the crowded field of jazz vocalists.