



The name says it all...

Just Jazz

August-September 2020

Hi Friends —

You hear it all the time: This or that jazz artist is “underrated” (as if *all* jazz artists weren’t “underrated,” but that’s another matter). **What does it mean?** What value does the word have, other than the most subjective one? A musician you say is underrated I may feel should not be rated at all. (And one I feel should be more highly rated you may believe is already overrated.) **A more useful, more objective term might be “overlooked,” perhaps even “forgotten,”** and, for whatever reasons, there are plenty of those in jazz: Dave Schidkraut, Tony Fruscella, Earl Griffith, Willie Wilson, Morris Nanton.

And that brings us to Beverly Kenney, the freshest, most promising jazz singer to emerge during the second half of the 1950s. While her most obvious influence is Billie Holiday, especially in the way she would improvise on a melody without resorting to scat, her bold harmonic sense approached the level of Sarah Vaughan. Beyond that were **the many unique and distinctive qualities of her work.**

For one, her **phrasing.** Like most effective jazz singers she handled lyrics in a natural manner, but one natural *to her.* She would often locate the stress in surprising and unexpected places in a way that was quirky, but not wrong, just personal. (And swinging.) Her **diction** was impeccable — the only singer I ever heard who, performing **“Violets for You Furs,”** sang the first word of the title (correctly) in three syllables, as a lilting triplet: **“vi-o-lets.”** And that faultless phrasing and diction are what made Beverly Kenney such a thoughtful and enchanting **interpreter of lyrics,** with none of the carelessness that betrays certain “jazz vocal legends” I could name.

But **it was her improvisational gifts that set Beverly Kenney apart from the rest of her generation.** She seldom chose to end a tune on the comfortable and expected tonic note. Her reworking of **“There Will Never Be Another You”** is worthy of Clifford Brown. Her compelling reading of **“’Tis Autumn”** concludes with an appropriately hip song quote. And on **“My Kind of Love”** she swings confidently alongside Basie-ites like Joe Newman, Frank Wess, and Jo Jones.

By the start of the 1960s, with six albums released in less than five years, she appeared primed for jazz acclaim, if not broader stardom in a rock and roll world. But **on April 13, 1960 Beverly Kenney committed suicide at the age of 28.** Gone, but not forgotten. **Overlooked, but not underrated.**

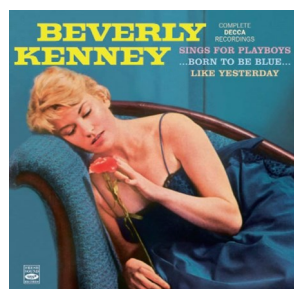
Stay cool, stay smart, stay well,
Bob

Beverly Kenney Discography

Beverly Kenney’s complete recorded works are available on CD. Her three superb Roost LPs — ***Beverly Kenney Sings for Johnny Smith, Come Swing with Me*** and ***Beverly Kenney Sings with Jimmy Jones and the Basie-ites*** — plus a 1954 demo session and a 1956 radio set from Birdland are collected on Fresh Sound’s two-disc **The Complete Royal Roost Recordings** (FSR CD-720).



Her three lush Decca albums — ***Beverly Kenney Sings for Playboys, ... Born to Be Blue,*** and ***Like Yesterday*** — along with a 1958 big band date led by bassist Eddie Safranski and her TV appearances on ***The Steve Allen Show*** and ***Playboy’s Penthouse*** can be found on another two-disc Fresh Sound release **The Complete Decca Recordings** (FSR CD-721)



Quotes of the Month

It’s been a long time since a singer of the knowing good taste and sweet good humor and tender good voice the quality of Beverly Kenney has come along.

– **Barry Ulanov (1955)**

Contrasted with other relative newcomers, Beverly is more flexible ... than Helen Merrill, and she is looser and swings more easily than the overly careful Teddi King. Beverly’s musicianship and care for lyrics is superior to Chris Connor’s, and she can stand partial favorable comparison with Carmen McRae.

– **Nat Hentoff (1955)**

RECOMMENDED INTERNET JAZZ RADIO

Sunday Night Swing Set: Swing is hard to define, but you know it when you hear it. Linda Yohn knows it *and* plays it. Sun. 7:00-9:00 p.m. ET

Late Night Jazz with Rusty Hassan: A Hall of Fame jazz broadcaster. Thurs. 10:00-midnight ET.

Café Latino: Singer-songwriter **Laura Fernandez** features two hours of great Latin music. Sat. 4:00-6:00 p.m. ET on Toronto’s Jazz FM91.

Jazz Lives: Hosted by Bob Dauber: “Classic jazz over the decades covering a variety of genres with one exception — smooth.” Mon. 9:00-11:00 p.m. ET

Friday Night Jazz: Hosted by renowned trumpeter-educator **Ray Vega.** Fri. 8:00-11:00 p.m. ET on Vermont Public Radio.

Jazz Spotlight on Sinatra: Nancy Barell presents Frank Sinatra’s music through the decades, along with jazz instrumentalists and singers performing songs he recorded plus other beloved standards. Tues. 7:00-8:00 p.m. and Thurs. 11:00 a.m.-noon ET.

The Tail-Finned Turntable and **Still Rockin’** hosted by my buddy, “the Golden Gup,” Gup Gascoigne. Sun. noon-2:00 ET on wnti.org.

NEW & RECOMMENDED CDS

Dena DeRose: Ode to the Road (High Note): Start with hip tunes delivered by a gifted singer-pianist and a sensitive bass-drum team, mix in a series of irresistible guest turns, and you’ve got Dena DeRose’s newest release. Longtime cohorts Martin Wind and Matt Wilson are there for every word and note, joined on two numbers each by trumpeter Jeremy Pelt, tenor saxophonist Houston Person — what a swingin’ groove they cut on “Days of Wine and Roses!” — and force-of-nature Sheila Jordan (dig the exhilarating *quodlibet** of “All God’s Chillun Got Rhythm” and “Little Willie Leaps”).

*It’s what the musically illiterate call a “mash-up.”

John Fedchock: Into the Shadows (Summit): Trombonist John Fedchock’s NY Sextet — trumpeter Scott Wendholt, tenor saxophonist Walt Weiskopf, pianist Alan Farnham, bassist David Finck, drummer Eric Halvorson — never fails to delight and engage. Five originals plus fresh treatments of three standards add up to a program of music without pretense or guile, just honest jazz, which is exactly what we’ve come to expect from Fedchock and company.

Lubambo/Alves/Ribeiro/Rogers: At Play (Broken Symmetries): The superb quartet of guitarist Romero Lubambo, pianist Helio Alves, drummer Edu Ribeiro, and bassist Reuben Rogers offers a program of genuine Brazilian jazz that is bright, uplifting, and, yes — as the title CD’s says — *playful.* There is no music anywhere more joyful and as much fun as the music of Brazil, and these four artists capture its spirit and express it with authenticity and affection.

Marvin Stamm / Mike Holober: Live at Maureen’s Jazz Cellar (Big Miles Music): Pianist-composer Mike Holober’s previous effort was 2019’s Grammy-nominated *Hiding Out* with the Gotham Jazz Orchestra. For his latest he goes in the opposite direction, pared down and united with eminent trumpeter Marvin Stamm for a straight ahead, quartet date. Stamm, Holober, bassist Mike McGuirk, and drummer Dennis Mackrel are fully at ease with themselves and each other, comfortably stretching out in this appealing live set.

And here’s something very special: Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers: Just Coolin’ (Blue Note): Unreleased for more than six decades, these 1959 tracks by one of Art Blakey’s finest Jazz Messengers units — Lee Morgan, Hank Mobley, Bobby Timmons, Jymie Merritt — is a gift you can’t turn down. These six tunes — half of them composed by the prolific Mobley, two others in their only recorded versions — are simply “capital-J Jazz.” Might as well face it: you *never* can have too much Jazz Messengers.

UPCOMING AREA JAZZ EVENTS

When there are any, I’ll tell you. Hey, I just gave you five new CDs to enjoy. Stay home and listen to them.

Acclaimed Jazz Books by Bob

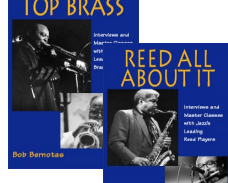
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