

made for Milestone, an entertaining survey of overlooked songs that is a triumph of thematic embellishment over thematic improvisation. The record was instantly dismissed by intransigent reviewers who cannot hear beyond the pulsing shield of electric bass. Admittedly, that sound is at first blush distracting—it is not the sound of jazz, or at least not the sound associated with a musician of Rollins's mettle and age. But if one listens to his superlative work in spite of the electric bass, one may discover in time that Cranshaw's attack is more complementary than we are predisposed to concede. The mix centers the bass, which animates the action around it and buttresses Rollins with a reliable and liberating harmonic platform. Given the amplification, Cranshaw's unwavering support is oddly unassuming. Flanagan is back, spelled on two selections by Stephen Scott, and so is DeJohnette, though the equally adept Al Foster does most of the drumming.

Two originals, "Biji" and "H.S.," suggest a continuation of Rollins's compositional powers, but the most impressive aspect of this album is his intensified ability to invent freely within the melodic constraints of such familiar songs as "What a Difference a Day Made" and "They Say It's Wonderful," such unlikely ones as "I've Never Been in Love Before," and the album's masterpiece, "Cabin in the Sky," one of the most unusual and accomplished performances Rollins has recorded. Embracing that song for all the nostalgic power he likely associates with Ethel Waters's renditions, Rollins ornaments it with inspired effulgence, as though the song were a trellis and he the latticework, and caps it with another brilliant cadenza. Measure for measure, he combines everything he has learned over the long haul about the suppleness of timbre and the chimerical distinction between free and orderly improvisation. As "G-Man" represents the development of ideas merely hinted at in "John S" and *Our Man in Jazz*, +3 suggests an interpretive confidence that makes the sacred "Blue 7" seem experimental and studied by comparison. Rollins's music encompasses one of the most generous dispositions in modern music. It glistens with oversized and contagious energy and bespeaks the character to sustain a course of singular purpose, despite the blandishments of the hip and the enticements of the powerful, with imagination and grace.

## 46 ❖ Dinah Washington (The Queen)

"I sure miss Dinah." Johnny Hartman's voice, leveled by awe and directed at no one in particular, penetrated the sudden silence at a rehearsal for a concert of jazz singing at Lincoln Center in 1981. The commotion of musicians and stagehands had subsided a few minutes earlier for the first time all afternoon, when a clip of Dinah Washington, from *Jazz on a Summer's Day*, a film of the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival, was projected on stage. Wailing "All of Me," accompanied by a Terry Gibbs Quintet, she wears a short, sleeveless, white blouson dress fitted just below the hips with a huge bow that bumps flirtatiously in time, and her face, under closely cropped hair, is a radiant pond of brown and red hues. During the vibes solo she grabs Gibbs's spare mallets and with the unrivaled sass that made her a tigress in and out of music, she invades his territory, not playing much, but taking contagious pleasure in hammering away. After Urbie Green's trombone solo, she resumes singing, the cadences glancing upward trumpetlike.

Few performers have taken a stage or stormed off one with quite the noblesse oblige of the Queen, who died at thirty-nine, in 1963. Over the next quarter century, her stature was in serious disrepair. One reason is that all her recordings except for a couple of sessions in her early years and eight albums made in her last year were done for one company, Mercury, which—much to its surprise, though not to Washington's—achieved a Top 10 crossover hit with her version of "What a Difference a Day Made" in 1959. The result was a siege of commercial records that remained steady sellers, while the jazz and blues performances that established her standing in the pantheon of singers were reissued fleetingly or not at all. Her vibrant career as a jukebox star in the late '40s and early '50s was largely forgotten or, worse, patronized: at the height of her fame, Mercury issued a compilation called *The Good Old Days*, picturing only a straw hat on the cover. As a result, it was considerably more difficult to get a handle on her twenty years in the studios than to get one on the careers of her very few peers—Smith, Holiday, Fitzgerald, and Vaughan.

In 1988 that changed when, under the guidance of Kiyoshi Koyama, PolyGram and Nippon conspired to release her complete work for Mercury, a project completed over two years with the release of twenty-one compact discs parsed into seven boxes—additional evidence, if any were needed, of how dependent musical artists are on the alertness of the

corporations that own their art. The first two boxes forced a reconsideration of the overlooked years in which she forged her style. Washington, as befits a performer who insisted on her right to sing without generic restrictions, was many things: the finest blues singer in the generations after Bessie Smith; an entrancingly original interpreter of ballads; a bold and graceful embellisher of melody and the jazz singer who most closely assimilated the brassy euphoria of Louis Armstrong's climactic flourishes; a pop star. *The Complete Dinah Washington on Mercury, Vol. 1 1946–1949 and Vol. 2 1950–1952*, documents the formation of her career, the choices she made, and those made for her.

The figures alone bear daunting witness to the neglect of Washington's work. Of the 119 selections, 56 are new to LP, let alone CD. Of those, 12 are alternate takes; 33, among them a few hits, were out only as singles; 11 weren't issued at all. Here's the rub: although some material in these collections is simply abominable ("My Heart Cries for You," "That's Why a Woman Loves a Heel"), little of it is found in the rediscovered material, which offers many savory blues and ballad performances. The era under consideration is from Washington's apprenticeship, when the label had her tackling every fad and fancy of the day. She was obliged to cover songs made famous by the Andrews Sisters, Kay Starr, Billy Eckstine, Rosemary Clooney, the Four Aces, Bullmoose Jackson, Hank Williams, and many others. Some of those arrangements are stodgy, tasteless, inert, and tactless. During and after the recording ban of 1948, she was choked by dreary vocal choirs.

In a way, this period mirrors the end of her career, when smoother but no less suffocating choirs and dubious songs became the norm. A difference is that in the beginning Mercury strove to enlarge her appeal among blacks; in the end the company conceded what the singer had long insisted, that she could reach the white mainstream as well. But just as Dinah persisted in singing dynamic jazz and earthy blues when they were out of fashion, she steadfastly insisted on first-rate songs throughout her initial "singles" period. Virtually every tediously arranged session is alternated with one that is lean and efficient. Whether the date was promising or meretricious, Washington remained assertively and saltily her own woman. No singer ever approached song with a greater reserve of pluck. Even in dire circumstances, her powerful wit, shining from deep inside, mitigates the obstacles.

In prime surroundings, another quality peeks through: a candid and teasing sexuality. Alberta Hunter, who once said, "They don't have blues singers now like they had then, except maybe Dinah Washington," considered Bessie Smith to be the greatest of all because even when she was

"raucous and loud, she had a sort of a tear—no, not a tear, but there was a *misery* in what she did." Dinah, who came to resent the constant comparisons with Bessie, had a sort of laugh, a simmering ebullience, even when she sang self-pitying laments. Where Smith was sorrowful and Holiday disaffected, where Fitzgerald was girlish and Vaughan operatic, Dinah was gloriously carnal. She never got high-toned, unless it was with the kind of humor that lets you in on the joke. Her very cosmopolitanism was streetwise. At the height of her powers, from 1954 on, Washington's virtuosity was so completely at the service of her personality that its raiment all but disappeared. By then she had developed and perfected her most characteristic mannerism. It was a unique *appoggiatura*, an effect seemingly as natural to her as her stinging timbre—an upward glide pinned to or squeezed out of a note, usually at the end of a phrase. Like so many attributes of her style, this one suggests a trumpet: a brief gliss pressed with an extra dollop of vibrato (she was the ultimate mistress of vibrato, swelling and decaying neighboring syllables to maximize the expressive values of every word); an echo of the pitched note that sometimes states and sometimes merely suggests an overtone of a fifth or an octave.

By the mid-'50s, when she recorded a peerless series of vocal jazz albums (*Dinah Jams, After Hours with Miss D, Dinah!, In the Land of Hi-Fi, The Swinging Miss D, Dinah Sings Fats Waller*) all the components of her style were in place, and she could successfully dare to outclimb the high-note trumpeters on "Lover, Come Back to Me" or out-roister Waller on "Christopher Columbus." Yet listening to the earlier work, you realize how long it took her to consummate the ideal blend of technique and personality. Her timbre was enticing from the beginning, but full recognition of all that her voice could do, beyond the relatively obvious areas of range and dynamics, took time.

Consider the matter of that *appoggiatura*. You hear only its implications from time to time in the records of 1946 and 1947. Not until the thirty-eighth track, "Record Ban Blues," probably recorded on the last day of 1947 and not released for twelve years (perhaps for fear of offending union boss James Petrillo, who demanded the ban and is named in the lyric), does it come fully into view. The high point of a good session with Cootie Williams's band, the song is simply the standard blues—complete with stop-time chorus—that Washington sang and recorded countless times. Maybe the daring lyric inspired her or the apocalyptic fever of the coming ban (she would record only seven sides during the next twelve months). In any case, she is loose and invigorating. The soon-to-be trademark gliss is heard on the words "boss" in

the first chorus and "late" in the second. She does it once on the next song, "Resolution Blues," too, but you hardly hear it again until April 1951 on the ballad "I Won't Cry Anymore."

If Dinah's sound wasn't fully matured at twenty-two, she was already a starkly distinctive performer. Indeed, if one considers all the singers who sounded like her or reflected her influence after she came to prominence—a list that includes Esther Phillips, Ruth Brown, Nancy Wilson, Etta Jones, Dodo Green, Dionne Warwick, and Diana Ross—one is all the more conscious of how original her approach was. Washington always named Billie Holiday as her favorite singer, but aside from the shared inclination to phrase behind the beat, albeit to rather different effect, the influence is faint. A more fruitful search could undoubtedly be made in the vineyards of gospel. If Dinah was the Queen of the Blues (a title she held like an escutcheon), she was a product of the church.

She was born Ruth Jones in Alabama in 1924 and raised in Chicago, where her mother played piano at St. Luke's Baptist Church. After performing piano duets with her mom for the congregation, she became known as a local prodigy, and at fifteen won a talent contest at the Regal Theater, singing "I Can't Face the Music." (Two versions of that song appear in the Mercury collection, each with an interpolation of Benny Carter's "Blues in My Heart"; the first was never issued, the second was released only as a single.) Neither the prize nor her growing infatuation with Billie Holiday pleased her devout parent.

*The Jazz Singer* is repeatedly filmed as a Jewish story, but it's really a black one. Few of the immigrant Jews who dominated songwriting in the Golden Age experienced religious versus secular pressures anywhere near as profound as those facing not one but several generations of black musicians. (Artists as disparate as Ethel Waters, Hampton Hawes, Ray Charles, and David Murray have described those pressures). To be sure, Ruth Jones was torn between the sacred and the profane—she sang secretly in nightclubs under adopted names, but finally took flight as the sixteen-year-old piano accompanist for a legendary gospel singer, Sallie Martin. For two years she traveled the gospel circuit, working with the Reverend C. L. Franklin (Aretha's father), Mahalia Jackson, and Roberta Martin, who greatly inspired her. Dinah was a charter member of the first all-women group, the Sallie Martin Colored Ladies Quartet. Then she briefly married the first of her many husbands (the best estimate is nine, though no one seems to know for sure) and returned to the Chicago clubs.

An indication of the ease with which she returned to secular music can be gleaned from a story Anthony Heilbut tells in *The Gospel Sound*:

many years later, the highly successful Dinah mischievously suggested to an old friend, the then struggling gospel singer Deloris Barrett, that she moonlight in the more lucrative blues field. Heilbut quotes Sallie Martin on Dinah's willfulness. "She could really sing," Martin said, "but, shoot, she'd catch the eye of some man and she'd be out the church before the minister finished off the doxology." Washington's experience on the gospel trail surely helped her to formulate an expressive use of melisma and scatlike humming, though Louis Armstrong, too, undoubtedly served as a prototype for those elements in her work. James Haskins cites another source of her style in his biography, *Queen of the Blues*: Bette Davis movies. Like Ethel Waters before her, Dinah was obsessed with proper diction and the possibilities of inflection. Her articulation, the luxuriant correctness of her vowels, the parlance with which she emphasizes meaning, are among the fundamental joys of her art. Her ability to lend credibility, sometimes underscored with sarcasm, to foolish lyrics is another bond she has with Holiday.

Yet her jazz career languished for a while. She remained in the twilight zone for years, despite the triumph at the Regal; the enthusiasm of clubowner Joe Sherman and manager Joe Glaser, who landed her a job with Lionel Hampton (all three boasted of having changed Ruth Jones to Dinah Washington, though none could remember why); and the acceptance of audiences and critics. Decca actually refused to let Hampton spotlight her on records, and he was careful not to let her overshadow his band in concert. The critic Leonard Feather changed all that by convincing the small Keynote label to record her with members of the Hampton band in a program of his own blues. Hampton was so impressed with her at the session that he sat in for two numbers and permitted his name to be used on the label. When "Salty Papa Blues" became a hit, Decca sued and Hampton's name was removed from the label. The bandleader now featured her on another Feather blues, the wacky "Blow Top." It was a hit, but she remained in recording limbo. A 1945 date for Apollo with a then nonstar band (Lucky Thompson, Milt Jackson, Charles Mingus) produced a dozen titles, mostly blues, but it wasn't until 1946, three years after the Keynote session, that she signed with Mercury and showed what she could do with a broader range of material.

Dinah began her Mercury contract with "Embraceable You" and "I Can't Get Started" and in the following years took a poke at every type of song making the rounds. In those days, a straight blues like "Baby Get Lost" (another Feather lyric) or "Long John Blues" (a fashionably double-entendre Washington original about a dentist with a soothing drill) could make the top of the rhythm and blues charts. So she recorded

dozens of blues—most of them with the same melody and stop-time climaxes, many in the key of C, though with varied tempo. She would remain a nonpareil blues singer until she died (her 1962 “The Blues Ain’t Nothin’ but a Woman Cryin’ for Her Man,” recorded for Roulette a year before her death, is a candidate for her best-ever work in the idiom). Strangely, the only awkwardness to be found in her blues recordings is on the album she made of Bessie Smith songs, probably a consequence of the hokey arrangements, which condescend to the material, and the pressures of the tribute. To trace her progress along the familiar twelve-bar route is to confirm steady advancements in wit, nuance, and bravura. On two magnificent sessions in 1952, she fulfilled all her early promise and intimated how much more would come with the exquisite “Trouble in Mind” (supported by her husband, drummer Jimmy Cobb, and saxophonist Ben Webster) and “Mad About the Boy,” in which she locates the soul within the whimsy of Noel Coward.

The pleasures she took in her reign as Queen can be adduced from two stories told by James Haskins. Once she inadvertently boarded a bus chartered for mentally retarded people and threw off the head count. The driver began to question the passengers. When he asked Washington who she was, she looked him in the eye and said, “I’m the Queen of the Blues.” “Yes, you definitely belong here,” he replied. During her tour of England, Dinah was cautioned not to say anything about the recently crowned queen. The first time she walked on stage, to a standing ovation, she announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m happy to be here, but just remember, there’s one heaven, one earth, and one queen, and your Elizabeth is an impostor.”

By that time, the press was covering her private and public behavior in lurid detail—all the marriages, the attempt on her life by a jealous woman, her temper tantrums on stage, her packing and firing a pistol, her outspoken and often hilarious comments to the press (Dinah’s acerbic “blindfold tests” in *Down Beat* are classic), her principled refusal to appear on TV if she had to lip-synch. Then, at thirty-five, she convinced Mercury to go whole hog in the production and promotion of “What a Difference a Day Made,” which lyric she changed to the present tense. Floated by the arrangement’s even triplets, she soared onto the pop charts. The label expected her to stay there, providing her with new motives for rebellion. Four years later, fighting a lifelong weight problem, she took too many diet pills while drinking and it was all over. Neither the blues nor jazz has found a worthy heir.

## 47 ❖ *Rahsaan Roland Kirk* (*One-Man Band*)

Roland Kirk could have achieved renown had he done nothing else but play tenor saxophone—for example, “Memories of You” and “Evidence” on *The Jaki Byard Experience*. Good thing he didn’t have to. Kirk was a piece of work on which Rabelais and Barnum might have collaborated. His dream life alone was apparently more invigorating than the waking lives of most mortals. In dreams came the names of his band, the Vibration Society, and his person, Rahsaan; in dreams came the shape of programmatic albums, for example, *The Inflated Tear* and *The Case of the 3-Sided Dream in Audio Color*. Most important, a dream gave him the idea of playing three saxophones simultaneously. Dreams, he said, “led me to see music even more clearly as a way of setting off vibrations within a person so that he can more deeply feel and recognize his identity and his potential.” Whatever. He bounded onto the scene like Gargantua, who entered the world through an ear drum, shouting “Drink!” Kirk’s shout was an invitation to partake of jazz in all its miscellaneous splendor, and some people found that intimidating.

No one who experienced him in performance can forget the sight: a stocky blind man swaying precariously back and forth on the lip of a bandstand, dressed in a yellow jump suit, his face implacable behind black wraparounds, blowing dissonant counterpoint on three saxophones of varying lengths, while other instruments, some of his own invention, dangled from his shoulders, neck, ears, and, on occasion, his nose. Talk about one-man bands. In later years, he also sang—a hardly dreamlike exertion that seemed to progress naturally from the preceding decade when his vocalisms were confined to bellows and grunts, often in tandem with his flute playing. He didn’t take singing lightly: Kirk put words to Mingus’s “Goodbye, Pork Pie Hat” and commissioned a lyric for Coltrane’s “Giant Steps.” The whole trajectory of his career suggested a willful increase in size and presence, from blues-rooted musician to virtuoso marvel to mystic philosopher and political gadfly. Kirk coined the peace-generation greeting, “Bright moments,” and created the Jazz and People’s Movement, which in the early ’70s burst onto several TV talk shows demanding more turf for jazz. The one memorable result was Kirk’s own surreal appearance on the Ed Sullivan show.

Someone—it may have been LeRoi Jones, who took umbrage when Kirk performed while twirling a bass atop his head in the early ’60s—must have accused him of gimmick mongering because by the time I