

# elaine DAME YOU'RE MY THRILL

As you listen to the lyrics Elaine Dame weaves with such masterful magic on this album, many of them may strike you as a decent metaphor for what she does on this, her second album. "They say it's wonderful," wrote Irving Berlin; you might say the same thing when you hear her handle his tune. "Shall we dance, on a bright cloud of music?" asked Oscar Hammerstein; isn't that what Dame seems to do as she traverses Richard Rodgers' beguiling melody? And when she sings "I'm All Smiles" – gracefully tripping through the mid-tempo waltz, applying a gentle warble to syllables hither and yon, sending this lovely lilt skyrocketing to paradise – only the hardest of hearing are likely to suppress grins of their own.

For all that, however, I keep returning to a phrase not heard on this album – a line from the 1932 ballad "Isn't It Romantic?" In that song, the lyricist Lorenz Hart spoke of "Music in the night / a dream that can be heard"; and the more I listen to Elaine Dame sing, the more such concepts as "romance," "music," and "dream" intermingle in my imagination.

In fact, if you had set about designing the dream jazz singer, you couldn't do much better than what Dame has managed on her own.

Her voice has a light, effortless clarity that could beguile you into thinking that's all you need; but in fact, the transparency of her tone lets you see the depth of emotion at its core. (Dame also plays flute, and you really can't escape the parallels between her instruments.) She floats through a melody with uncanny precision: her intonation is perfect, but her control of inflection lets her arrive at each note without revealing the work that went into the journey. Like the great modern instrumentalists, she mostly eschews vibrato – something that singers lacking her exactitude wouldn't (or at least shouldn't) dare; and when she does let a note waver, she applies the vibrato sparingly and smartly, to an individual note for specific effect.

Her phrasing of a melody reminds you of the best horn players, without ever letting the words escape her notice; if a saxophone could speak, it might sound like this. She swings exactly as hard as she needs to, barreling into a stomper like "I Was Doing All Right" but judiciously pumping the brakes on the title track. And when she improvises – again, sparingly and smartly – she frees a melody from its written restraints while respecting its intent.

All of which would add up to less than its parts, if not for the tastefulness that Dame has made her stock in trade: You can design all the other elements of our dream jazz singer, but you can't manufacture heart or soul. Those qualities inform Dame's choice of material, her approach to each song, and even the musicians she has gathered. (In truth, she could hardly have gone wrong there. A singer of Dame's musicianship attracts good instrumentalists the way Cleopatra drew Romans.)

The arrangements that she and her collaborators have crafted neatly frame the spirit of each song; even better, they frame the spirit of the singer. And the range of the material offers further proof of Dame's exciting evolution as an artist. Her allegiance to the *Great American Songbook* may form the base of her book, but here she stretches it to include a couple of folk-rock anthems from the 1970s – Richard Thompson's "The Dimming of The Day" (lithely harmonized by Dame's fellow Chicagoan and musical soulmate, Paul Marinaro), and Joni Mitchell's "All I Want." On the latter, Dame disproves the prevalent belief that you can only sing Joni Mitchell's songs by "doing" Mitchell; instead, you hear an artist in such complete command, she can go toe-to-toe with one of history's most recognizable singer-songwriters and emerge successful.

"Do you want to take a chance / On maybe finding some sweet romance," Mitchell wrote, and when Dame sings it here, there's no gamble whatsoever. Sweet romance imbues this album from start to finish, with gorgeous, down-to-earth musicality serving as ballast. Clear away some time on your schedule, because you'll be listening to this album again and again.

– NEIL TESSER, Grammy-award winning writer for Concord's remastered and expanded reissue of John Coltrane's *Afro Blue Impressions* and author, *The Playboy Guide to Jazz*.