

Rene Marie breaks out

Jazz songbird's fans know the sound of one heart singing

By Bill Gallo, Special to the Rocky

Saturday, January 12, 2008

One of the most fluent and original jazz singers in the world lives on a quiet street in suburban Broomfield.

Rene Marie doesn't have the name recognition of Diana Krall, who does credit-card commercials on TV, or the high profile of Denver native Dianne Reeves, who's won a Grammy and appeared in movies like *Good Night, and Good Luck*.

Not yet, anyway.

But top jazz musicians everywhere know Marie. So do a growing number of fervent jazz listeners. They're knocked out by her voice's suppleness and range, impeccable pitch and all-out way of living every lyric.

They also know about her penchant for risk - for defying authoritarian club owners, for liberating standard tunes from their ancient cocoons, for launching her socially provocative originals, with scant rehearsal, in packed concert halls. They know how she reinvents material from unlikely sources - Bonnie Raitt, Bob Seger, The Beatles.

In 2002, *JazzTimes* magazine chose *Vertigo*, Marie's second disc on the St. Louis-based MaxJazz label, as the best jazz vocal CD of the year. The Academie du Jazz, in Paris, has given her its prestigious Billie Holiday Award. She's performed duet concerts with Kevin Mahogany at the Kennedy Center and essayed the songs of Josephine Baker at the fabled Apollo Theater in Harlem.

Closer to home, Denver pianist Jeff Jenkins says: "She has the most complete vision of anyone I've ever worked with. She creates her own universe, and it's never the same twice. She's really into the give-and-take with other musicians, and once you enter that universe, there's complete freedom."

Singer Lannie Garrett admits to being intimidated just sharing the same room with Marie and pays her friend the ultimate jazz insider's compliment: "Rene's not just a singer. She's a musician."

Transformation

With a few different turns in the road, Rene Marie might have wound up completely off the radar. She might still be working part time at a Roanoke, Va., bank, putting up with her first husband, who never supported her singing career, and slipping away to some quiet corner of the house to secretly sing jazz into a tape recorder. She might still be ringing doorbells for the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Instead, Marie embraced the unknown. Ten years ago, at age 42, she broke her chains. She left Brion Croan, the man she'd married at age 18, after he delivered an ultimatum to give up her crazy notion of a professional singing career or get out.

She left her husband's (and her) religion, to which she'd devoted 24 years of crusading and acres of shoe leather.

She left her name. Rene Stevens Croan transformed herself into "Rene Marie" - a woman renewed, an artist who thinks for herself.

In essence, she left behind the husk of a conventional life - compliant spouse, selfless mother (her two sons are now almost 30 and undertaking artistic careers of their own) and unfinished dreamer. She did the most difficult thing any American can do: She wrote her own second act.

What compelled her? For one thing, she was fed up. For another, she had memories of past trauma. Alcoholism runs deep in her family, and her brother Eric, a talented painter whose work hangs in her home, is currently alcoholic and homeless. She couldn't forget the beatings her late father, a Roanoke teacher, inflicted on her mother.

But her breakout also was fueled by joy.

"There was always music inside me and all around me," says the singer, whose name in French means "reborn." "I finally found a way to live up to my name."

The prodigy

As a child, she'd heard her father singing in the house. She taught herself to read music at age 9 by watching an older brother practice at the piano.

"I matched up those little black dots on the paper with what he was doing with his hands on the keyboard."

At 10, the prodigy was winning talent contests. At 15, she was writing songs, at 17 singing in local clubs.

Her teenage marriage stopped all that cold. For more than 20 years, Rene Stevens Croan sang only to herself and her sons. After the babies were asleep, she absorbed her great predecessors, Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald - their breathing, phrasing and improvisational flights. Like a painter sketching from the masters, she took in their art so she could change it.

The black proto-feminist Nina Simone had already changed her in ways she didn't completely understand until later. It was the authenticity of *Mississippi Goddam* and *Young, Gifted and Black* that filled her sails. Simone was instrumental in giving her the courage to rebel.

Almost 40 years later, Marie speaks emotionally about hearing her first Simone record at age 15: "It's almost incalculable, what she means to me."

Marie's new CD, a self-produced collection of originals called *Experiment in Truth*, features a moving tribute to her muse, *O Nina*,

that combines lyrics from Simone's uncompromising anthems, reinterpreted by her musical descendant.

After returning to clubs 10 years ago, Marie moved to Richmond, Va., in 1998 and financed a debut CD, *Renaissance*, out of her own pocket. Two years later, her first MaxJazz CD featured a steamy reinvention of *The Very Thought of You* and an expansively beautiful *Afro Blue*.

But it was the title tune, Marie's own *How Can I Keep From Singing?*, that announced the arrival of her newfound assertion, as she sang: "No storm can shake my inmost calm/How can I keep from singing?"

It was clear that she couldn't. Nor did she care to heed the old order.

On the road, the middle-aged "newcomer" ignored the owner of Chicago's famous Jazz Showcase when he ordered her to stop "insulting jazz" with her originals and revert to standards. At the end of the week she was still singing her own work, and the club was sold out. She promptly wrote a tune gently chiding the owner - and sang that, too.

A daring medley

Marie calls herself a "GRITS" ("a Girl Raised in the South") but no one below the Mason-Dixon Line, or anywhere else, knows what to think the first time he hears the most daring medley in her repertoire.

When she first sang it in Mississippi, every jaw in the place dropped. When she called the tune, using its short name, in early rehearsal at the recording studio, drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts, who came up with New Orleans-born trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, dropped his sticks and said, "I'm not playing that."

Not playing what?

Marie, who relishes the drama of the unexpected, had thought to pair the traditional white anthem *Dixie* with the heartbreaking meditation on lynching *Strange Fruit*. She brought off the collision of opposites as an ironic comment on the way the world still works.

In Mississippi, black and white audience members approached her afterward with tears in their eyes and tragic stories to tell. The same thing happened everywhere else, too. Born in controversy, *Dixie/Strange Fruit* became the emotional centerpiece of Marie's much-praised CD *Vertigo*.

Anyone shopping for symbols can find one right there, illustrating the purposes of Marie's unblinking, semiautobiographical work.

"I want to make you laugh and cry," she says. "I want you to squirm uncomfortably in your chair, think of a loved one, get angry, hang your head in shame and raise your hand in protest. . . . I want you to take that leap, make that change, turn that corner."

That's just what she's done herself for the past decade, of course.

Moving on

After recording her fourth CD for MaxJazz - aptly called *Serene Renegade* - the singer cut ties with the label ("I never saw a penny from sales"), pulled up stakes from an unhappy stay in Atlanta and in 2005 moved to Denver - a city she didn't know, steeped in a culture she didn't understand.

Was she looking to turn another corner? Was she drawn again to risk?

"That could be. I don't know. I do know that I wanted to live someplace where no one knew me and I didn't know anyone," she says.

She had once performed at the now-defunct Jazz in the Sangres festival, in Westcliffe, and had a friend with an attractive property in Aurora. And there the story might end, at least for now, were it not for a beautiful accident of fate.

Soon after coming here, Marie volunteered to take phone calls during one of jazz radio station KUVU's periodic pledge drives. By chance, the man sitting next to her was software designer Jesse Johnson, who'd seen Marie's picture, heard her music and told friends he'd like to meet her someday.

Talk about a love song: Rene and Jesse were married a year later. Five months ago, they moved into their sparkling new house in Broomfield, where the singer-songwriter took a break from the strain of the road, recovered from recent bouts with strep throat and continued work on a one-woman show that incorporates songs with narrative.

Last year's frantic pace had propelled her from Europe to Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola at New York's Lincoln Center and to the Josephine Baker show at the Apollo. Now she plans to work closer to her new home, at least for the moment.

She's recorded an original single called *Three Nooses Hanging*, a pointed meditation on the Jena Six student race incident in Louisiana. On Jan. 21, she'll sing at the annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dinner for Those Who Hunger at Sunset Park.

She's booked at Dazzle, Donald Rossa's top-drawer club on Lincoln Street, Feb. 29 and March 1, with her regular working group, High Maintenance. And in March she'll open in the lead role of a show called *Dinah Was*, about the tragic singer Dinah Washington, at Capitol Hill's Shadow Theatre.

"I needed stillness," she says. "I needed a quiet time to regroup. When I'm singing and the set ends, there are little pieces of me scattered all over the bandstand that someone could come and sweep up. Sometimes you need relief from that. I was completely exhausted."

Now the old spirit is back. Given her voice and the contents of her back pages, she should make an ideal Dinah Washington. Meanwhile, the one-woman show she's writing, ironically titled *Slut Energy Theory*, comes to grips with the quandary of young women in a male-dominated world: how they regard their bodies, deploy their heat and, if they can, gain self-awareness.

It's the work of a woman who knows "what it's like to be trapped in an unhappy marriage;" who says she's now "reclaiming my face" from makeup artists and the expectations of others; who fulfilled her dreams late.

It's the work of an artist who's reinvented the songs of others and now sings none but her own. Just for starters, 13 unreleased tracks remain from last year's *Experiment in Truth* sessions - enough for another CD when the time comes, for another plunge into the

unknown.

"There's always a new door in front of you," Marie says. "You find a way to open it and pass through."

Hear here

* **Jan. 21:** Rene Marie will sing at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dinner for Those Who Hunger, sponsored by Volunteers of America, from 3 to 6 p.m. at Sunset Park, 1865 Larimer St. It's an event where people can "serve" about 1,000 meals and give away warm clothing to others. For more details, call the VOA's Jim White at 720-264- 3323 or check voacolorado.org.

* **Feb. 29 and March 1:** Marie and her group, High Maintenance, play at Dazzle, 930 Lincoln St.; 303-839-5100 or dazzlejazz.com.

On disc

Rene Marie's CDs can be difficult to find but are available by special order in stores, via the Internet and in downloadable digital format. Here's what Bill Gallo has to say about the releases:

* ***Renaissance*** (1998; as Rene Stevens Croan): This self-produced debut has long been out of print; the singer plans to reissue it.

* ***How Can I Keep From Singing?*** (2000, MaxJazz): Marie's breakout disc includes jazz standards such as *The Very Thought of You* and *A Sleepin' Bee*, as well as the heartfelt title tune, which announced her overdue arrival at age 44.

* ***Vertigo*** (2002, MaxJazz): A multiple prize winner (the French Academie du Jazz gave her its Billie Holiday Award), it features a brilliant *Surrey With the Fringe on Top* and Marie's controversial pairing of *Dixie* and *Strange Fruit*. That's the splendid Mulgrew Miller on piano.

* ***Live at the Jazz Standard*** (2004, MaxJazz): The intimacy of a celebrated New York club turns up the heat on standards and originals.

* ***Serene Renegade*** (2005, MaxJazz): includes originals like *Autobiography* and *Ode to a Flower* and the jazz chestnut *Lover Man*.

* ***Experiment in Truth*** (2007). Self-produced and recorded live in Charleston, S.C., the disc features Marie's ode to Nina Simone, *O Nina*, a new version of *Vertigo* and a disturbing story-song about domestic abuse called *Weekend*. With her regular working trio, High Maintenance. Available by direct order at renemarie.com.

* ***Three Nooses Hanging*** (2007, Sloan Publishing): a meditation on the Jena Six incident (sample lyric: "I close my eyes and all I can see are three nooses hanging from the 'white folks tree' "). The single, recorded in Denver, is also available from Marie's Web site.

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