



FAMILY GUY CREATOR SETH MACFARLANE: FROM CARTOONING TO CROONING

JazzTimes

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all about **ELLA**

INSIDE HER LONG, COMPLICATED
RELATIONSHIP WITH NORMAN GRANZ

ARTIST'S CHOICE!

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By Larry Appelbaum

Gretchen Parlato

TONE, TIMBRE, TEXTURE

Since winning the 2004 Thelonious Monk Jazz Vocal Competition, California-raised, New York-based Gretchen Parlato has become a favorite of critics, fans and fellow musicians. The 35-year-old sings standards, but not from the dog-eared pages of the Great American Songbook. With a musician's sensibility, she carves out idiosyncratic arrangements of jazz instrumentals and Brazilian sambas, as well as pop and R&B gems from the '80s and '90s. She's also starting to write more, and her song stories are as distinctive as her phrasing.

It seems everyone wants to work with Parlato these days, and she's already appeared on more than 50 recordings, including projects with Lionel Loueke, Kenny Barron, Terence Blanchard, Becca Stevens and Esperanza Spalding. Parlato's latest recording as a leader is *The Lost and Found* (ObliqSound).

1. Gregory Porter

"Illusion" (from *Water, Motéma*). Porter, vocal; Chip Crawford, piano. Recorded in 2010.

BEFORE: Greg Porter? Yeah, nice. I love him. We met at the old Zinc Bar at the Monday night jam session. He has a beautiful quality to his voice—his placement, his resonance, his tone. I love that combination: Hints of soul and R&B mixing with jazz roots. To me, that's like the perfect combination. I've known him since I moved to New York seven years ago. He's a really sweet person. I was so happy he was nominated for a Grammy. More people need to hear him. I know this piece, but most of what I know of him is sitting in live, just being blown away by what he can do. And he's so humble.

2. Wayne Shorter

"Juju" (from *Juju*, Blue Note). Shorter, tenor saxophone; McCoy Tyner, piano; Reggie Workman, bass; Elvin Jones, drums. Recorded in 1964.

BEFORE: [*chuckles*] I've heard this a lot. [Saxophonist] Dayna Stephens wanted to play this song in the ensemble when we were at the Monk Institute. And then Terence Blanchard suggested I write lyrics for it, so I have to credit them for pushing me in that direction. This is the definitive version, but we tried to take it somewhere else, though there's nothing like the original, with the mood that the artists created. The word "fire" keeps coming to mind. There's this intensity and high dynamic that they created.

I don't know what Wayne meant by the title. I met him at my audition for the Monk Institute, and he said [*imitating Wayne's voice*], "We've been waiting for you." It's amazing that at his age [77] he's still pushing boundaries; he's still pushing the music and carrying the music into another dimension. He has that mind like a child, where you would think of playing every piece like you've never heard it before. Throughout his career he's always been a step ahead, but he doesn't think of himself on this high plane. He's always in the moment, always trying to reach and touch people.

Has he heard your version of "Juju"?

He's heard it and he gave me his thumbs up. He's always been so encouraging of the direction I'm going in. He says it's always about tone, and that track you played of Greg is all about tone. I learned that from Tierney Sutton. She used to talk about what it feels like to sing and to have this sound produced from your body. And I think that's what Wayne meant, that it's all about getting pure resonance and tone. I just love that piece.

3. Tierney Sutton

"Blue in Green" (from *Blue in Green*, Telarc). Sutton, vocal; Christian Jacob, piano; Trey Henry, bass; Ray Brinker, drums. Recorded in 2001.

BEFORE: Speak of the she-devil! [*laughs*] I'll try not to cry. I love

her. I studied with her when I was 17, and this arrangement of "Blue in Green" was a big inspiration, with lyrics by Meredith d'Ambrosio.

I can go on and on about Tierney Sutton. She was my first private teacher. I went to hear her sing and I walked into this little club in the Valley and she was sitting on this little stool. She had her long, blonde, mermaid hair, then she opened her mouth to sing and she just blew me away. In my head, I thought, "I want to do that." I connected to that and was so immediately attracted to that approach. Her natural voice is similar to mine. She used to joke about it: "We're like the white-chick singers, the soprano singers." We don't sound like Sarah Vaughan or Betty Carter. We have a different sound, and she was about, how can we honor that? What can you do with it? Where can you take it?

And it was all about being educated, gaining and earning respect from other musicians by just being really good at what you do. She inspired me to have that kind of mindset. I studied and soaked in everything she's ever done. She has a band that's been together for 15 years, and to have such good musicians dedicated to that project says a lot about her. I was her nanny when she had her son. We're 10 or 12 years apart, so it's like big sister, little sister, and it's really nice that she took me under her wing. Everything that I do in that whole mental space, and connecting with the moment and other musicians, I think that comes from Tierney. I don't think there's any closer connection you can have with another person.

4. Ran Blake and Sara Serpa

"Our Fair Cat" (from *Camera Obscura*, Inner Circle). Blake, piano; Serpa, vocal. Recorded in 2010.

BEFORE: [*immediately*] Is that Sara Serpa? That's great. I don't know this track but it's a really interesting piece. There's a quality to her voice that's really distinct. It reminds me of how Luciana [Souza] uses her voice. It's a really straight tone and she'll use vibrato infrequently, but when she does, it kind of warms up the note and you say, "Oh." It's kind of the way João Gilberto does it. The tone and the placement are right on, and every now and then she'll add a little color to it.

We've been placed together in a similar school of how we might use our voices, leaning a little more toward an instrumental approach. I've heard her singing instrumental lines with Greg Osby, and that's a very specific skill where you're learning to blend with another horn, choosing the right syllables, vowels and consonants and where that note is resonating. It's choosing if you want to be blending perfectly with the horn, or if you want to come away from it just enough so that you can tell it's a human voice.

Do you know her personally?

Yes. New York is such a big city, but the scene is small enough and kind of closely knit where we run into each other all the time. She's a beautiful person and a sweetheart and I love her approach and what

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she's doing. This piece is really interesting, and it makes me want to hear more.

5. Tribalistas

"Velha Infância" (from *Tribalistas*, Phonomotor). Arnaldo Antunes, voice; Carlinhos Brown, percussion, bass, voice; César Mendes, guitar; Dadi Carvalho, guitar, piano; Marisa Monte, guitar, cajón, voice. Recorded in 2002.

BEFORE: I don't know who it is but I love the textures here. I love thinking about what's necessary in terms of texture, in terms of getting low, mid and high ranges of percussion, of instrumentation, and kind of filling that all out. The production here is huge, and I love the singing in octaves. It's not Seu Jorge, is it?

AFTER: Oh, Marisa. I don't have any of her albums, but her name keeps coming up and I know she's someone I need to follow and keep track of. This is really beautiful, very full. That's what's so wonderful about Brazilian music: Every space is filled with some kind of texture, and then you just let it be so there is a sense of sound and space and flow in the moment. There's something in that that reminds me of water.

6. Solveig Slettahjell

"Look for the Silver Lining" (from *Silver*, Curling Legs). Slettahjell, vocal. Recorded in 2004.

BEFORE: I love humming, and I love that it's a cappella, just voice. It's so powerful. When she started humming, it triggered something. Maybe it's because everybody does it, whether you're a singer or not. I'll often do that when I'm teaching. I'll say, "Just sing it as if you're trying to sing a melody and reminding somebody of a song." What I mean is, sing it as if you're not trying to sing—just let it be an extension of your speaking voice, where it rolls off effortlessly.

This song is also done like a lullaby; it reminds us of being cradled and comforted. There's something about her voice that reminds me of Kate McGarry or Luciana Souza, but it's not either of them. And I detect a slight accent, so maybe it's someone from somewhere [laughs]. Who is that?

AFTER: I love when singers are brave enough to be vulnerable and just expose their voice alone. Then, as listeners, we pay more attention to the lyrics and every little inflection and detail. It's beautiful.

7. Carmen McRae

"Satin Doll" (from *The Great American Songbook*, Atlantic). McRae, vocal; Jimmy Rowles, piano; Chuck Domanico, bass; Joe Pass, guitar; Chuck Flores, drums. Recorded in 1972.

BEFORE: I love Carmen. She's got that grit in her voice; I could tell immediately from her entrance that this is a jazz singer. I love the bass-voice duet. My dad's a bass player and we used to sing and play together. And Tierney was an advocate for gaining that intimacy from the beginning. It keeps the music and listener in the palm of your hand. It's very powerful. You have to know the changes to sing with just bass, but you can take it anywhere. It's a great way for singers to expose that they really know their stuff. You could tell that these guys are the real deal.

8. Kurt Elling

"Matte Kudasai" (from *The Gate*, Concord). Elling, vocal; Laurence Hobgood, piano; Bob Mintzer, saxophone; John McLean, guitar; John

Patitucci, bass; Terreon Gully, drums and percussion. Recorded in 2010.

BEFORE: Kurt. Is that from his newest record? I have to buy that. Again, texture comes to mind—the guitar and the mood. It was deceptive to hear the bass come in at first. I wasn't sure where "one" was, or even what meter it was in. And then, hearing the groove, it was like, "Ah, OK." And then having things build and sneak in, I love that kind of arrangement.

Kurt has such a distinctive voice. He's such an inspiration. I remember I was in Brazil and I heard his version of "My Foolish Heart" on the radio. His arrangement has a groove and is very soulful, and I remember thinking, "Who is this guy?" He's incredible. His voice is a perfected instrument. It's clear he knows what he's capable of and where he can push himself. He knows the timbre, tone, quality and resonance of each part of his voice. He can fall into using his voice in so many different ways, but he can also be a kind of classic jazz singer. He can swing his butt off. I love his vocalese. I love everything I've heard him do. Like with Greg Porter, I hear that kind of nasal resonance—and every time I use that word "nasal," I use it in the best way. I feel he just loves to sing.

9. Bahamian Traditional Singers

"Up in the Heaven Shouting" (from *The Caribbean: The Bahamas—The Real Bahamas in Music and Song*, Nonesuch). Bruce Green, Tweedie Gibson, Clifton Green, vocals. Recorded in 1965.

BEFORE: Wow, I love that. I have no idea who it is. It sounds like a field recording. I connect to the a cappella as a singer; maybe everybody does. That bass singer is *out*. I love that throat-singing quality. This reminds me of when I was at UCLA in the ethnomusicology department. Something we did often was just listening to music and writing about it or talking about it, training your ears to analyze and hear what is going on. I think that helped my ear for what I'm trying to do now as an artist—being able to hear details when it's thrown in your face, letting it sink in and then being able to hear what's underneath.

This gives me goose bumps. It's connecting humans to humans. It's roots music, the beginning of everything. They're not on a stage; they're not in a museum. It sounds like they're sitting on a porch.

AFTER: That call-and-response—this is where everything comes from. People give me credit for using my voice as an instrument, but people have been doing this all over the world since the beginning of time.

10. Billie Holiday

"Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone" (from *Rare Live Recordings 1934-1959*, ESP-Disk). Holiday, vocal; Jimmy Rowles, piano; Artie Shapiro, bass. Recorded in 1955.

BEFORE: [periodic laughter] Wow, I've never heard that before. It's precious to hear her in rehearsal like that; it's like going behind the scenes. And it's funny. Who's the pianist?

You can hear her life in her voice. She's so swinging and yet so understated. And every melody that she would sing and alter and improvise on in her own way was often cooler than the actual written melody.

Any student who wants to learn about phrasing and interpretation has to listen to Billie Holiday. For some really young singers, she kind of goes over their heads because there's so much depth to what she's done. Maybe you've had to experience some junk in your life. There's something about joy and pain that comes through her music. **JT**