

Precise Canadian Jazz-World Singer Provides a Sparkling Diversified Collection

June Garber - *This I Know*



BY JOHN APICE
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At first, I looked this CD over carefully and wondered if this lady was going to take a modern approach to **Julie London**, **Patti Page**, **Anita O'Day**, **Cleo Laine** or maybe **Jo Stafford**.

I would have mentioned **Rosemary Clooney** and **Dinah Shore** and the like, but **June Garber** – who just may be Canada's First Lady of Jazz -- doesn't come across as a pop-jazz artist. There is something quite unique when women today attempt this genre today and this lady is quite a diversified force. Her voice is not as honey-drenched as the young **Ella Fitzgerald** or **Lena Horne**. Her presentation isn't as bluesy and gutsy as **Billie Holiday**. Her voice *does* have lots of personality, a velvety smooth professional tone and hopefully, as I listen to these tracks that professionalism won't get in the way of her ability to bring forth *character* to her arrangements.

I already previewed the music and track three has already made a big impression – because that one is enriched with style.

But, for now, let me just cruise through some of these songs. What I hear is a lady who isn't afraid to push the envelope and experiment and I admire that. Is this music for the **Adele** crowd? No. (Though Ms. Garber does cover Adele). **Norah Jones**? Maybe not. **Cassandra Wilson**? Maybe. **Madeleine Peyroux** – ah, there is possible link. But while I cite these singers, what makes June Garber special is her roots -- and that is going to surprise many.

“Underneath the Jacaranda Tree,” is an upbeat calypso oriented tune that begins the journey of the album *“This I Know.”* You would think this type of song would be better suited to some female island singer with a background in reggae, calypso and other world music. Or, a world singer from another continent altogether. But this sophisticated looking platinum blond pulls it off. She really does. She has the inflections down, the tone and the band is sand and surf hot. The female backup vocals -- unified, the brass skitters through the palm trees, and the male backup vocals are deep voiced and frame the melody beautifully. She wraps the song around her vocals like a child wraps a warm blanket around its body.

“Live for Life,” has a nice clarinet-type sound in this classic ballad. More from the **Peter Nero-George Shearing** song book, but there's nothing here that needs dusting off. The song shimmers in its gentle tickling piano with an under the surface accordion and lightly played cymbal beats. It's 1950's polished with 2016 wax and Garber, from Johannesburg, South Africa and living in Toronto presently has her musical endeavor in clear focus.

Upon first listening I am tempted to say this is a first-class piano bar artist. But I'd be wrong and I'd be unfair. This lady is much more than that. This is an artist who could hold down the fort at The Beacon Theatre in NYC, Carnegie Hall or any venue of that highly esteemed class. And you don't have to be a tuxedo wearing, starchy button-down shirt audience member to appreciate this nightingale -- ok a little dramatic, but I can't stand the word diva. It's over-used. When she starts the **Duke Ellington-Don George** song *“Hit Me with a Hot Note,”* stand back -- she whips out the goods and she ain't foolin'.

The revised lyrics, on today's level, sound like something **Tom Waits** would have penned and this was originally a Duke Ellington tune! The male backup vocal is intense, effective and spiritually straight out of the early *studio recording* of **Joan Armatrading's** ("*Love and Affection*") -- on YouTube.

The arrangement has some nice, invigorating deep saxes, a sharp trumpet, a slinky, sexy, sensuous vocal with a steady jazz infused drum beat. This is **Peggy Lee** with **Benny Goodman** revisited ("*Why Don't You Do Right*") -- on YouTube. This could easily be a showstopper song at the Newport Jazz Festival for June Garber. The voice is used to its limits – gritty, smooth, snaky...absolutely perfect in a jazz sense.

This platinum blonde then proceeds to dip into a miracle when she begins to sing a sweet ballad in Swahili. Yes, you heard me right.

The fluegelhorn is reminiscent of the best of **Chuck Mangione** – but, here the brilliant solo is by the legendary **Guido Basso** which picks up the tempo nicely. Even if you do not understand the language the music alone and the vocalizing is beautiful to listen to. Educate yourself.

June Garber goes low into a middle-of-the-road whispery ballad – typical of the 50's chanteuses of the smoky neon lit blues-jazz clubs that were legendary in New York City at this time. "*I'm Gonna Live Until I Die*," offers as well, a peppery sax solo that even *Billie Holiday* would approve of. Jazz drummer *Ben Wittman* is tight, reliable, tasty and always on the money.

Some say June was brave to tackle the **Frank Sinatra** standard "*It Was a Very Good Year*." But, those writers don't realize this song was a hit for two other artists prior to *Frank Sinatra*. It was first recorded by **The Kingston Trio** (1961) and then covered by the rock group **The Turtles** (1965). Legend has it that it was his son **Frank Sinatra Jr.** who brought *The Turtles* version to the attention of his father. Even English-skiffle singer **Lonnie Donegan** recorded it (1963) before Frank. The song has a history, many covers, but yes it took years before the song became a standard in Frank's capable hands. *June Garber*? Her female vocal version is quite excellent and respective of Frank and few female vocalists have ever covered it.

June doesn't stop here with classics. She tackles impeccable songwriter and stylist **Hoagy Carmichael's** wonderful "*Baltimore Oriole*," and sustains it with a nice retro guitar solo courtesy of *Ted Quinlan*, and a sidwinding sax by *Alison Young*.

Something more modern surfaces with June's cover of **Peter Allen** and **Carole Bayer Sager's** famous "*Don't Cry Out Loud*." And even on this collection, this basically commercial song fits perfectly in this June Garber repertoire.

The arrangement is creative and it's elevated to a formal, effusive jazz rendition. June's vocals are so sincere and disciplined and it's helped along with the distorted guitar of *Aidan Mason* who infuses the song with sparks – small sparks that saturate the achingly beautiful manner that June pushes along through her reading. This is where a pop song is allowed to wear a "more expensive" suit of notes and appears to be a far better song than many could have ever imagined. This is the talent of June Garber, her arrangers and her musicians. She takes a cheeky commercial pop song and renders it a jazz-classic. This is what the **Butterfield Blues Band** did to **The Monkees'** "*Mary Mary*," what **Cassandra Wilson** did to their "*Last Train to Clarksville*," and what **Taj Mahal** did to their "*Take a Giant Step*." All blues classics today from pop origins. Of course, in jazz **Miles Davis** chose songs like "*Autumn Leaves*," "*Bye Bye Blackbird*," "*Stella by Starlight*," "*My Funny Valentine*," -- hardly jazz tunes. But, in Miles' hands -- classic jazz.

This song is now damn good and I never liked "*Don't Cry Out Loud*," because it just reeked of an assembly-line commercially bombastic piece for my taste. But this one – this is really good. They say if you prepare chicken livers properly, spice it up, marinate it, the person who hates liver will never know what they're eating. This song has been cooked properly for once by a chef who knows her way around a musical kitchen.

Now *June Garber* has been rolling along with some exciting world tunes, good ballads, middle-of-the-road ditties and jazz classics. But, on the next track – "*Rumour Has It/Fever*" -- she decided to expose some rock roots and has delved just a little into *Peggy Lee's* background. This brief version of "*Fever*" is the hottest version since **Elvis Presley** performed it live and sexy during his Hawaiian concert. This is one of those songs that just never loses its energy and fire – especially if it's in the hands of a pro. *June Garber* is a pro -- no doubt about it and she nailed this one down like few can.

June mines in the same wonderful territory as the Italian-jazz singer **Daniella Nardi** (also from Canada) – who I reviewed here in **No Depression** several years ago. These two women would duet excellently.

Coming close to the end now June returns to a street-jive upbeat South African type folk song "*Meadowlands.*"

Here, June abandons the jazz leanings and sounds more like a **Miriam Makeba** type singer and she is surprisingly effective. It's a fun song despite the fact its subject-matter deals with the 1955 removal of Black families from their homes in Sophiatown, Johannesburg to Meadowlands, Soweto. Seems trouble follows these poor people no matter what continent they're on. Quite a good folk song and sung compellingly by Ms. Garber.

The final song is a gentle melodic ballad with June in another voice. This is almost similar to the unique and beautiful voice of **Susan Osborne (Paul Winter's Consort – "Lay Down Your Burden.")** -- available on YouTube for previewing. This is a stunning ballad, and if you're not a jazz enthusiast – this one is a heart wrenching, formal and faithful song. "*Unbroken,*" features *George Koller* playing the Dilruba (an Indian instrument that produces a more haunting, elaborate violin-sitar type sound). This is the type of song that would be covered by the likes of **Judy Collins**, or the late **Mary Travers** and the wonderful **June Tabor**. However, it's quite a meticulous, intensely beautiful song sung with the lone voice of **June Garber**. An appropriate closer as well.

The album of 12 songs was produced by George Koller and Mark Kieswetter. The arrangements were by George, Mark and June except for "*Malaika,*" which was arranged by Bruce Cassidy.

The album art (by *Yesim Tosuner* and *Backyard Design*) is a splendid full color six-panel CD – lots of appropriate credits, but no lyrics. The photos of June are appealing, but don't let her sophisticated, mature look fool you. This woman covers the gamut of many genres effectively and she can rock. I was pleasantly surprised by the scope of the entire project.

This artist -- and that's what she is -- is filled with ambitious surprises.

That image on her website of June with her wide smile, arms out in the red dress would be an ideal CD cover. Her enthusiastic smile and the joy in her eyes is captivating. Even the black and white version is stunning. Kudos to the photographer who captured June's essence in this photo. *Lovely.*

Website: <http://junegarber.com/>

FaceBook: <https://www.facebook.com/June-Garber-23762233212/>

SoundCloud: <https://soundcloud.com/june-garber>

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