

Jazzwise

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**'WE MUST
START TELLING
OUR OWN
STORIES'**

JULIAN JOSEPH

FROM BRIDGETOWER
TO BLACK BRITAIN TODAY

IAN BALLAMY
**EXPECT THE
UNEXPECTED**

MIROSLAV VITOUS
BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

JOHN MCLAUGHLIN
DAYS OF DOOM

MARTIN FRANCE
TURNING POINT

**'NEW MUSICIANS
ARE LOOKING
FOR SOMETHING
DIFFERENT'**

RASHIED ALI

REAWAKENING OF
THE AVANT-GARDE

**PLUS
CAMERON PIERRE
ANDRÉ BROWN
RAMSEY LEWIS
ALISON DEWAR**

**THE UK'S
BIGGEST
SELLING JAZZ
MAGAZINE**



TAKING OFF TAKING OFF TAKING OFF TAKING OFF TAKING OFF TAKING OFF

ROOM TO BREATHE

Singer Alison Dewar has just released her debut album *Nature*. Peter Quinn talks to her about her no-nonsense approach to jazz singing

"She's totally dedicated in the studio and also ably supported by a world-class rhythm section, happy to tackle tunes from all genres and give them her unique touch. Between them they've created unusual arrangements and compelling new treatments of great songs," says sax player and producer Derek Nash of the South African-born (now London-based) singer, Alison Dewar. High praise indeed. And given that Nash has engineered and played sax on both of the singer's recordings to date – her new release *Nature* and last year's 5-track sampler EP *Introducing Alison* – he speaks with some authority.

Growing up singing and performing in Johannesburg, the singer's passion for jazz was first stoked on a brief European sojourn. Relocating to Switzerland in 1996 (the singer's husband is half-Swiss) – and displaying the kind of drive that typifies her approach – Alison decided to get some formal music education under her belt, enrolling first at Zürich's Academy of Contemporary Music before moving on to further study at the Zürich Jazz School and the St Gallen Jazz School. The dedication which Nash refers to suddenly snaps into focus

when you realise that all of this tuition was, of course, conducted in a foreign language. You'd have thought that getting to grips with the circle of fifths, substitute chords, and a bewildering array of modes and scales would be tricky enough in English, but in Swiss-German? Yikes. It's enough to make your head spin. If breaking through as an artist requires a huge effort of will and an iron-like determination, Alison looks all set. Oh, and did I mention the private vocal lessons in Bern?

"I just immersed myself in it," the singer explains over coffee at a Bloomsbury hotel. "The more I heard and the more I learnt, the more I wanted to learn – and that's still very much the case now. The two recordings that really grabbed my attention were Diana Krall's *Cover Stories*, which for me is one of the best albums I've heard in jazz, and the Ella Fitzgerald/Louise Armstrong duet album. Those two really made a big mark on me."

Whether delicately floating above the retro stylings of *Nature Boy* – all shimmering Fender Rhodes and low, curling flute lines – tender and conversational in a gorgeous *'Solitary Moon'*, or oozing Gallic charm on *'Once Upon a*

Summertime (set up beautifully by ex-incognito pianist Graham Harvey's chiming, Side-the-opening chords), the singer's fluid, graceful and understated approach serves her well. Harvey is very much the recording'slynxspin, supplying all but one of the album's imaginative arrangements in addition to his rhapsodic soloing and excellent comping. Topped off by Andy Paravy's tasteful flute work, the powerhouse engine room of Dave Chamberlain and Matt Skelton, plus the talents of the aforementioned polymath Nash, the singer luxuriates in the very finest instrumental support.

Not being the type of person to sit back and wait for things to happen, Alison's introduction to the London jazz scene involved getting hold of a copy of *Time Out* and going to see as many gigs as possible. "Simone Cosburn was the first person that I went to see and he was incredibly helpful. He put me on to Jazz Services, who suggested that I make the five-track sampler. I also met with Derek Nash and he suggested several pianists. Things happen for a reason and it was, 'OK, whoever I can get hold of that's the person I'll go and see'. And it happened to be Graham. He was playing at the 606 and we

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ended up auditioning each other very late into the night. I really liked his style, and he liked what I was doing as well – so one thing led to another."

The material on the singer's new release *Nature* divides neatly between songs learnt specifically for the recording and songs that were already seared into the fine print of her consciousness, some of which had a very special significance.

"*Desafinado* was the first bossa that I learnt and I've always loved it. *'Solitary Moon'* is the most beautiful ballad – I was dying to do that. My favourite singer is Shirley Horn and I came to learn that song through her. She always takes time to sing a song, never rushes. Her timing is genius. I still feel very sad that she passed away and I guess in a way it's a dedication to her. With the other songs, it was a case of sitting down with Graham and exploring ideas. *'Hi-Fi'* (the Jon Hendricks vocalese) was something that I didn't know. Graham recommended it to me and I was so pleased that he did. It's a great song. I definitely learnt so much recording this album. I had to apply everything I've ever learnt about music, about singing, about everything connected with the album. I've grown so much having done that."

The fact that the singer's self-penned bossa didn't make the final cut is further testimony to the seriousness with which she approaches her art, her stringent quality control determining that the song hadn't yet had the required time to bed down properly. For Alison, the critical factor when

selecting material is "something with great lyrics, that's always very important to me when choosing a song. I do by not to listen to too many versions, because I want to try and develop my own style. It's very important that I sound like me, and not a copy of one of the great masters. The process would be getting the music, learning the melody on the piano, learning the lyrics and then bringing them

together. Later on I might listen to a couple of different versions once or twice, just to get an idea of other interpretations. Nowadays a lot of singing is very embellished, and I try to keep away from that. Also, all my singing teachers throughout my life have been very strict about singing the song straight before you start adding things. It's so drummed into me. The music must have room to breathe." ■

