

About Lovely Days

Every recording by San Francisco vocalist **Sherri Roberts** shares two defining characteristics, an intuitive mind-meld with a master instrumentalist, and a smartly curated array of undeservedly neglected songs. Featuring her pillowy, pleasingly unaffected vocals, her new CD *Lovely Days* highlights both aspects of her artistry. A duo session slated for release on Blue House Recordings in association with Pacific Coast Jazz Records, it's an intimate, emotionally incisive celebration of the American Songbook's infrequently turned backpages showcasing the brilliant but little-documented Bay Area pianist **Bliss Rodriguez**.

The album opens with a pair of Irving Berlin songs that lend the album its title, an ingenious medley linking the Maestro's overlooked 1950 gem "**It's a Lovely Day Today**" with "**Isn't This a Lovely Day**," one of several Berlin standards introduced in the classic 1935 Astaire/Rogers vehicle *Top Hat*. The transition from the seductive ballad treatment of the first song to the sauntering swing of the second is executed with such grace that the change in key barely registers.

"Originally I was going to swing both of them, but Bliss suggested using 'Lovely Day Today' as more of a rubato introduction, and it just started working wonderfully," Roberts says. "Bliss is very talented at finding these seamless ways to segue between songs, making it appear they're flowing directly into each other."

The album's other medley exemplifies Roberts's gift for generating emotional intensity with a minimum of fuss. She and Rodriguez turn "**I Have Dreamed**" into a slow-burning bossa. The insinuating groove flows from another *The King and I* classic, "**We Kiss in a Shadow**," which begins and ends the medley in a wistful rubato.

An aficionado of the Brazilian Songbook, Roberts includes a ravishing version of Dori Caymmi's sighing "**Like a Lover**" ("O Cantador," with the tender Alan and Marilyn Bergman lyric). And she plucks a little-known jewel from the Dave Frishberg treasure chest in "**Our Love Rolls On**." She finds several other unexpected gems, like the gorgeous ballad "**Soon It's Gonna Rain**," from the Off-Broadway warhorse *The Fantasticks*, and the lilting jazz waltz "**I'm All Smiles**," a tune from the 1956 Broadway flop *The Yearling* that's better known in jazz circles as an instrumental number recorded by supremely lyrical pianists like Bill Evans and Hampton Hawes.

A leading torchbearer for the less-is-more school of jazz singing, Roberts has listened closely to understated vocalists like Helen Merrill, Irene Kral, and Chet Baker. The relaxed, swinging interpretations of "**Nice and Easy**" and "**Come Dance With Me**" serve as an homage to the inimitable Shirley Horn (though Roberts adds a playful, rarely heard verse on "Come Dance" that casts the terpsichorean invitation in a slightly different light).

Horn, of course, accompanied herself, and in Rodriguez's distinctive touch and highly simpatico comping Roberts has the next best thing. Throughout the session, their connection turns every song into an enticing caper. Even on an anguished version of the ballad "**What'll I Do**," they can't suppress the evident pleasure they take in each other's company.

"We share a love of 1940s and '50s Broadway, those lush, romantic songs with undercurrents of longing," Roberts says. "Bliss creates a fabric beneath me that I can sing into. He's really drawing on the imagery within the song and it's hard for me not to respond in my presentation of the lyrics."

Sherri Roberts's knack for uncovering the roiling emotional undercurrent of a lyric probably stems from her theatrical background. Born in Greenville, South Carolina and raised in Atlanta, Roberts spent her teenage years as an aspiring actor. She earned a B.A. in theater from Antioch College in Ohio, while at the same time exploring her newfound fascination with jazz. She also studied 20th-century avant-garde and early Renaissance choral music.

Relocating to the Bay Area in the early 1980s, Roberts pursued her love of theater, but gradually discovered that she could find more immediate creative release in jazz, investigating characters and an entire narrative arc in the course of a song. Turning her attention to the bandstand, she started sitting in at open mic sessions, learning tunes and honing her skills as a storyteller.

All her work came to fruition in 1996 when she released her breathtaking debut album *Twilight World*, the first of her two albums for Brownstone Records. The album marked the start of her decade-long creative relationship with bass master **Harvie S** (formerly Harvie Swartz), who also played a central role on 1998's critically acclaimed *Dreamsville*.

Their musical relationship deepened on Roberts's last album, 2006's *The Sky Could Send You* (Blue House Recordings/Pacific Coast Jazz). Produced and arranged by S, the album features alto sax great Phil Woods and powerhouse trumpeter Lew Soloff. While *Lovely Days* is her first recording without S manning the bass chair, he still had light fingerprints on the production.

"When I was down to my final decisions about what takes to use I sought his advice, which I ultimately listened to," Roberts says. "And he also referred me to the studio that mixed the CD and the engineer who mastered it, Kevin Blackler, who worked with Harvie earlier in the year on his 'recovered' duo recording with Sheila Jordan, *Yesterdays*. So I still relied on Harvie's ears and experience on this project."

While S supplied modest background support, the album is animated by the electrifying connection between Roberts and Rodriguez. Their relationship dates back about six years, when he started subbing for her regular accompanist, ace pianist (and husband) David Udolf. They quickly discovered a deep musical affinity, and performing regularly at the Donatello Hotel's snazzy Zingari Lounge over the years gave them opportunity to develop the kind of loose but sturdy arrangements that spark the numerous serendipitous moments on *Lovely Days*.

"I decided to approach this recording as an opportunity to let Bliss stretch out, because I wanted people to experience his inventiveness," Roberts says. "But I also wanted the album to reflect the kind of experiences I've had on our gigs together. I wanted these songs to unfold as they would as if people were hearing us live. We're feeding off each other emotionally."

Born on April 2, 1945 in New York City to parents from the Dominican Republic, **Bliss Rodriguez** was born with limited sight and by the age of 17 had become completely blind. He got an early taste of the spotlight while in high school with childhood friend Jose Feliciano, with whom he performed widely in an instrumental trio.

A rigorously trained musician who studied at Juilliard and graduated from the Mannes College of Music, he went on to get a Master's in performance and composition from SUNY's Harpur College at Binghamton, where he also performed with jazz masters such as **Frank Wess**, **Slam Stewart**, **Manny Albam**, and **Eddie Daniels**.

Always looking for adventure and opportunity, he spent much of the 1970s in Houston, where he forged his first close relationship with a vocalist, performing widely with a rising star named **Roseanna Vitro**. He spent time on the New York City and Los Angeles scenes before settling in San Francisco in 1986.

He's forged a reputation as a highly original solo stylist, with a harmonically dense sound full of intricate cross rhythms, though he's also worked with leading Bay Area jazz figures like vocalists **Laurie Antonioli** and **Robin Gregory**, trumpeter **Graham Bruce**, and bassist **Ron Crotty**, an original member of the Dave Brubeck trio and quartet. An overlooked Bay Area treasure, Rodriguez shines so brightly on *Lovely Days* he seems likely to shed his status as the region's best-kept jazz secret. For Roberts, an artist who also is due a good deal more recognition, that was the idea.

"From the get-go I felt that Bliss was a real original," she says. "He hasn't really recorded much, if at all. In the duo setting, which is how we work, he's so abundantly creative. It's a setting in which you're both laid bare. As time went on I felt we should try to capture some of this relationship and Bliss's talents. That was the impetus to go into the studio and make this recording." •

Sherry Roberts with Bliss Rodriguez: *Lovely Days*

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