

Taking the Bull *With* the Horns

by Skoot Larson

An incredible entertainer who is difficult to pigeonhole, **Katie Bull** is proving to be a unique vocal talent, jazz musician, composer and lyricist, actress, director, dancer, voice coach, teacher...and the list goes on. If you have any doubts, just listen to Bull's latest CD/DVD collection, "The Story, So Far." It will make you both a believer and a devotee of this captivating performer.

Bull's creative approach to music has been in evidence right from her first recording, "Conversations with the Jokers," in 2002. The lady's 2004 disc, "Love Spook," hints at an extraordinary multi-media event to come, with half the selections, both words and music, coming from Bull's imaginative pen. "The Story, So Far," we can safely assume, is just what it says, the further progression of this *giant* talent, maturing toward super-world-beater status.

The DVD portion of this package not only displays the many sides of Katie Bull; actress, dancer, and vocalist, but also introduces the fine musicians from the session and the actors/dancers of the **Bull Family Orchestra** theater group.

The compact disc mixes some fantasy, some folly, and some beat generation ideology in a vat of ripping, swinging jazz. Bull's lyrics are **though provoking** and somewhat cerebral as they describe true-life events and feelings mixed with a dash of **down-and-dirty politics and fun**. "Next Generation Doodlin'," is a grand example. The original "Doodlin'" was written by pianist Horace Silver over fifty years ago. Words were added a decade later by Jon Hendricks, telling of a hipster thought to be crazy because of the stream-of-consciousness scribbling he left everywhere. Katy Bull's "Next Generation Doodlin'," shows that this hip insanity has evolved into the new millennium, where the doodles bounce around in the mind, no pad or pencil required.

The recording's opener, "Which?" is a grabber, what one might think of as *Mingus Mysticism*. Bull cries out a frantic call-and-response duo with saxophonist **Jeff Lederer** over the thoughtful piano of **Frank Kimbrough** leading from lyrical poem to beautiful scatting. Solos are solid, straight-ahead improvisation, punctuated by background shouts and cries from the Bull Family Orchestra players. The words deal with the mood swings one might find in any relationship, and fit hand-and-glove with the schizophrenic feel of the music. A clap of distant thunder punctuates the final notes of this questioning "Which?"

In Bull's shaping hands, the Lewis and Koots standard "For All We Know" turns into a somewhat cynical conversation, half spoken, half sung, and book-ending a bountiful batch of scat vocal over the cleverly disjointed comping of Kimbrough. The piano man's solo on this classic uses clever syncopation, his chords lagging slightly behind the beat.

Bull adds a touch all her own to Wardell Grey and Annie Ross's "Twisted." Ross's offbeat lyric has been performed by many in a variety of genres, but never with such an interesting 'twist' as on this recording! "Twisted" was written as a tribute to the 1950's hipsters' fascination with insanity. It's story relays a first-person account of *hiply* bizarre actions intended to impress ones psychiatrist. Katie Bull brings the crazy tale to life,

accompanying her vocal bridge with an overdubbing of her split-personality voice, a fourth step above. With Lederer's wild tenor added to the mix, Belleview and Camarillo quickly springs to the mind of this *twisted* listener.

It isn't an exaggeration to call Katie Bull a genius. Listen to the clever and often timeless words she writes, and the striking musical lines the lady puts behind these poetic offerings. Her song "Jack" sounds like the pseudo-intellectualism of the 50s, painting a cool and quiet cat assumed to know more than he's saying. "Go Ahead," a duet with bassist Joe Fonda, tells of the self-centered, "all-about-me," individual we see on the road every day, going forward with no regard for other drivers.

The packaging is as alluring as the discs themselves. The tri-fold sleeve is characterized with assorted angels, devils, clowns, and other medieval-fantasy folk. The outside colors on this work-of-art are dark and foreboding, opening onto a bright and colorful resolution mixing fancifully penciled denizens with photographs of the merry revelers making up Bull's players. The musicians themselves are pen-and-inked on one fold as a troop of satyrs and man-beast combinations, each bearing the face of one of her accompanists.

The cats in the band are all players of near mythical proportions. Bull's group features long time friends and fellows: Pianist **Frank Kimbrough**, **Joe Fonda** on contrabass, the drumming of **Matt Wilson** and simpatico saxophonist **Jeff Lederer**, augmented at times by **Michael Jefry Stevens** at the keyboard, the guitar of **David Phelps**, drummer **Harvey Sorgen** and the saxophones styling of **David Cast**.

This full musical show falls into perspective when you consider that Katie's father, Richard Bull, was a well-known dancer and jazz pianist. Katie grew up around the theater, absorbing the workings and fine points of music, acting and Terpsichore right from the source. As her powerful verve moves forward, we can only guess how far out the story's next chapter will be.

You can learn more about the multi-talented Ms. Bull at www.katiebull.com. "The Story So Far" and other Katie Bull discs are available at www.cdbaby.com.