

Cynthia Sayer's "Attraction" is as Magnetic as its Title

by Skoot Larson

Cynthia Sayer is an anomaly in modern jazz. Cynthia is a banjo player. Not an ordinary, run-of-the-mill banjo player, but a master of her craft, and a damn fine singer, actress, composer and musical arranger as well!

There was a time when the banjo was almost an essential instrument in a jazz band, and the greater part of the repertoire was performed to get an audience smiling and dancing as it provided relief from the harsh burdens of life. Over time jazz became more serious as it moved ahead rhythmically and phonically. The more cerebral aspects of bebop, hard bop and the other movements that followed left the poor old banjo back in the dust with the *moldy figs*.

A few players, like Dick Roberts, Emanuel Sayles, and Clancy Hayes kept the banjo tradition alive, but none of them attempted to move forward or try anything radically new on the five-string instrument.

Enter Cynthia Sayer, a ten-year veteran of clarinetist and comedian Woody Allen's New York jazz combo, as well as performances with the New York Philharmonic.

This internationally acclaimed lady has recently released her eighth compact disc album of banjo jazz, "Attractions," and it's music that all fans of improvised music will take a fancy to, no matter what genre they favor.

Cynthia Sayer plays and sings happy jazz, an amalgam of swing, traditional, and good old-fashioned fun. On this latest work, "Attractions" she is joined by other stellar performers like Bucky Pizzarelli, Randy Sanke, Greg Cohen and Scott Robinson. Sayer is also credited with the arrangements on this disc, which are a marvel in and of themselves.

Sayer's choice of material adds to the Mardi gras feel of this disc, including songs like "Aba Dabba Honeymoon," "Romance Without Finance," and "Shakin' the Blues Away."

Her opener is a golden jazz oldie written by the great Sidney Bechet, "Viper Mad." Although the lyrics are dated, dealing with roaring twenties folks' affinity for getting high, Sayer's interpretation and delivery provide as much fun as the old words she is singing! Right away, the mood is set in this blend of swing and Dixie. Sayer and

guitarist Pizzarelli break it up with a tasty exchange of conversation in four bar swaps. In honor of the song's composer, Scott Robinson provides a solid soprano saxophone in the mix.

On the more serious side, Sayer displays her technical mastery with a solo performance of "Hungarian Rhapsody #2," her five strings sounding like four-or-five times their number as her hands deftly walk along the fingerboard. Joined by violinist Sara Campbell and bass wizard Greg Cohen, Sayer works similar magic with a gypsy melody of her own entitled "Banjo Tango." Following the violin's lead, Sayer and Cohen dazzle with their bass-to-banjo interplay.

A personal favorite is Sayer's treatment of Tiny Grime's humorous "Romance Without Finance (It's a Nuisance)." The lady serves up some spoken call-and-response with the fellows in the band along with her honeyed, gold-digger singing voice, ending the number with more spoken rap on the subject of short-bread. All Sayer's sidemen are in especially grand form here with the lady strumming a fine "rhythm guitar" background on her banjo for the soloists, before trading fours with Sanke's trumpet. Sayer's jolly brand of entertainment cries out for more space in the jazz world, recalling as it does the good-old-days of Slim and Slam, Harry the Hipster and Louis Armstrong's fine novelty numbers!

The unique blend of violin and banjo are revisited in Django Reinhardt's "Swing de Paris," and Sayer has even included a seldom-heard-in-jazz voicing of Hank William's tune, "Half as Much."

Although Scott Robinson is credited with every other sax, on Sayer's instrumental piece, "The Gift," the man must playing the giant B^b bass horn. This saxophone proves difficult for many because of its size and awkwardness, but Robinson's nimble fingers bring forth world-class improvisation here with a pleasant change provided in this sax's deep tonality. The balance of the bass reed against the banjo's soprano contributes another sway of magnetism in Sayer's fine arranging arsenal.

In all, "Attractions" is one of those rare performances in which every cut is equally interesting and enjoyable, and can be purchased direct from the artist at www.cynthiasayer.com, or at www.cdbaby.com. Wherever you purchase "Attractions" it's a bargain for all the enjoyment this music will provide to you.