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Kelley Sutenfield

[Kelley Sutenfield](#) proved she could handle a variety of jazz styles in a full band setting for her 2009 Rhombus Records debut, *Where Is Love?* Understandably, she went spare for her second round in the intimate, revealing, and intensively spacious, *Among The Stars* — due to drop September 30.

The East Coast-based, acoustic jazz vocalist and guitarist [Tony Romano](#) found themselves in a special space and time on a weekly basis at a Manhattan wine bar for two years. Nothing big, nothing fancy, but very mood-enhancing. There, they began to workshop a selection of covers for an audience. “We started by ‘shedding’ tunes each week on the stand to see which songs stood on their own and which ones listeners responded to,” Sutenfield explained on August 16. “And after a few weeks’ time, we had identified a general body of work, as well as a future recording date.”

By the spring of 2013, the duo was ready to take the audience favorites into the studio for four, half-day sessions. It took them a little longer to fine-tune the project post-production, which made for a very satisfying 10 final tracks. The songs cover familiar (Rodgers & Hammerstein’s “People Will Say We’re In Love,” Bart Howard’s “Fly Me To The Moon”) and unfamiliar territory (k.d. lang’s “Wash Me Clean,” Bob Dylan’s “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight”), rearranged to suit Sutenfield’s bare to the bone emotional torch.

Removing the full band for only vocals and guitar meant exposing Sutenfield and, to a slightly lesser extent, Romano, to every possible threat of imperfection — which is just what this NYC Jazzmobile Vocal finalist wanted.

Sutenfield went on record about her most creatively daring album yet, including her use of silence as the third instrument — a jazz reflex in only the best players.

What made you want to do a completely different kind of album with *Among The Stars*?

This project came about from a weekly duo gig we had that ran for about two years at a cozy, little wine bar in Manhattan. It was a dark, rustic, and romantic setting complete with candles, a fireplace, and an abundance of wine. I was very aware of the worldly atmosphere the owners had personally cultivated, and I made musical choices that I felt best suited the scene. After just a few weeks of playing there, I realized we had a unique "mood" CD in the making and I set about to develop and refine a set of material to capture this particular moment in time.

What do you do differently to these standards and covers?

The delivery of these songs – particularly in voice-guitar duo format – is very different from how it would be on a recording with full instrumentation. With only two players, each instrument is fully exposed, and the slightest flaw becomes magnified 20-30 times over. To counteract this effect, the delivery needs to be understated and subtle. The arrangements are scaled back and spacious, a moment of silence becomes a third instrument, and the vocal placement at times is almost a whisper in the ear. The visualization I used when recording was that we were creating a collection of (adult) lullabies for the listener.

What parts of the recording are you most proud of? Any songs in particular you found especially worthwhile?

I'm proud of every track on the CD, in one way or another, and the way they complement each other as a collection. And individually, each one is like a child with their own story to tell, so it's hard for me to single any one of them out. However, I will say, that it was extremely satisfying to be able to record the opening track, "Fly Me To The Moon," in one take with no edits. And I do feel as if someone just might have pressed the "magic" button during the recording of "One Fine Day." At this writing, the songs that speak loudest to me (in order of track listing) are: "Fly Me To The Moon," "Harvest Moon," "Wash Me Clean," "One Fine Day," "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight." But ask me next week, and I might have a completely different answer for you. And that's a good thing, in my book.

How do you feel you're different from other jazz vocalists? What of you do you bring to the performance?

That's a very big question, and I'll do my humble best to answer. The thing that immediately comes to mind is vocal tone. I tend to lead with a voice that resonates in the body, not the head. For me, that's the shortest route to connecting with the music, and that's also the placement that feels best. A lot of flattering descriptors have been applied in past reviews: "smoky, sultry, velvety, soft, soulful," etc. so hopefully I'm doing something right. Another conscious choice is with song selections and arrangements, as you will see on this CD. I gravitate towards unusual choices – be it selecting an obscure song like k.d. lang's "Wash Me Clean," or "balladizing" an up tempo classic pop tune like Carole King's "One Fine Day." And then there's live performance, which is completely different from such controlled choices, yet very closely linked. Unlike many of my peers, I did not make a decision to pursue this craft until after I was already settled in NYC. So, much of the early development – flaws and all – has taken place on the stand, in front of the audience, musicians, club owners, and some very kind-hearted individuals. Though I constantly work to refine my flaws, I will always allow them to peek through. A perfect performance is not always the most engaging one; it's our differences that make us unique.

What about these particular songs drew you? How do you feel you and Romano did in bringing out each song's emotional truth and musicality?

Each of these songs has its own backstory, I suppose. For example, "Fly Me to the Moon" is one of those buoys that you can't avoid in a sea of jazz standards – I perform it quite often on smaller gigs – yet Tony managed to take it to another level with his stellar arrangement. Without hesitation, it became a top candidate for the recording. Another example is "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight." We both had our own personal references for that song that were – intentionally or otherwise – infused into the arrangement to evoke a new experience for the listener (as well as ourselves). And again, there was no discussion – instantly it was on the track list. In response

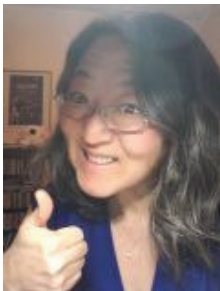
to your question about emotional truth and musicality, well...truth and love are very important to me in personal practice, and also in music. The songs I choose are typically timeless in lyric. I need to be able to get behind what I'm saying in order to send a message with any real purpose or conviction. If that truth is missing, then I'm just parroting someone else's words, and how authentic is that? Then once the lyrical foundation is established, I have the freedom to experiment with the delivery. Would I really say this to a loved one? And if so, how? Finally, add the conduit of music, and all becomes transcendent. Fortunately, I have been able to work professionally with Tony for several years now, and we have established an understanding of each other's musical strengths. We know how to pit them against each other to produce a certain synergy and this CD is a culmination of that interaction.

There's obviously an evolution in the arc of progress stylistically from your debut CD to this follow-up. How do you feel as an artist about your growth?

It's an interesting comparison; however, they are two completely different projects. My first CD, *Where Is Love?*, was more about establishing a presence, getting on the map, and showing the world what I could do within a variety of musical sub-genres with the support of a full band. In contrast, *Among The Stars* is intensely focused and completely laid bare. There is nowhere to hide in a setting like this with both instruments and players fully revealed. In order to get into the proper head space in the studio, I had to be confident in my musical choices, even in moments when I didn't feel it, for the greater good of the project. That requires a certain amount of maturity and growth as an artist, and also a human being. From a style perspective, I would argue that this is not a new style for me, just another side of the coin. It's always been there, but with this project came the opportunity to further develop it and bring it to the foreground. I suspect the next recording – whenever that may be – will draw from both experiences, and land somewhere in the middle.

Is there an official CD release show in the works, and/or a tour?

Yes! An official CD release concert is planned for December in NYC. I am in the process of confirming the date and venue right now. And as this is a "quiet" program, with minimal instrumentation, we will be planning additional concerts in dedicated listening venues throughout the area. CDs will be available through major online retailers, or on my website, and also at our performances. For the latest information, please visit www.kelleysuttentfield.com, and/or request to be added to the mailing list.



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