

Singer-Songwriters Follow Their Muses

New releases this spring by three unusual singer-songwriters suggest how personal a muse can be, and a variety of approaches to tapping it. Two are from North Carolina natives with Appalachian musical roots who have gone on to write sophisticated songs that draw on Americana, rock, blues, gospel, folk, country and jazz. The third is a native of Yamanishi, Japan, who is in love with and deeply influenced by Brazilian jazz.

The first two, Becca Stevens and Sarah Siskind, also just happen to possess two of the most thrilling female pop voices of their generation. Like Joni Mitchell, Bonnie Raitt and Trisha Yearwood, they are instantly recognizable and have that combination of delicacy and emotive force that can bring goosebumps to your skin.

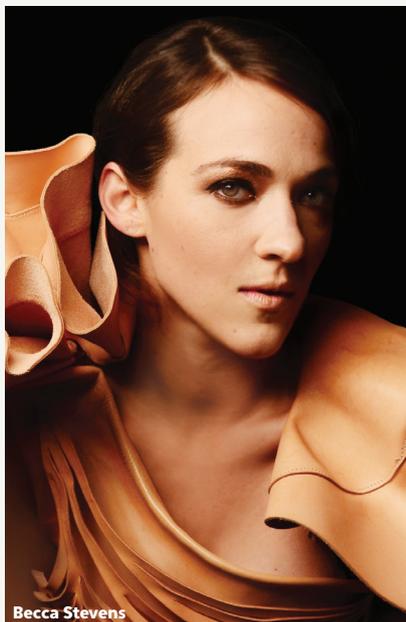
Becca Stevens' **Regina (GroundUP Music; 63:08 ★★★★★)** is the most spectacular of the albums. The long-awaited follow-up to 2015's *Perfect Animal*, it is a fully realized, rapturous meditation on queens in history, myth, literature and her own fertile imagination; Regina is also Stevens' muse and alter ego. With help from co-producers Troy Miller (an outstanding drummer), musical wunderkind Jacob Collier and Snarky Puppy bassist/composer Michael League, Stevens has produced a complex, densely layered studio album with allusive songs that are alternately dreamy and spine-tingling. This is a richly collaborative album that also includes the talents of singers Laura Mvula, Jo Larry and Alan Hampton, as well as David Crosby (yes, *that* David Crosby). Her bandmates are an equally impressive lot, and include bassist Chris Tordini, keyboardist Liam Robinson, drummer Jordan Person, and the Attacca String Quartet.

The one cover, Stevie Wonder's "As," is an inspired choice for the album's closer. It's a Collier home-studio production that features hushed, coiled vocals by both singers winding gracefully around each other, backed by Stevens' trademark playing on the Andean *charango* and Collier's lush vocal harmonies.

Ordering info: groundupmusic.net

Sarah Siskind's new EP, **Love (Self Release, 20:24 ★★★★★)**, is simplicity itself: six new songs with her roots-rock trio Sunliner. And it's a knockout.

Siskind cut her songwriting teeth penning hits for Alison Krauss ("Simple Love"), Randy Travis and Bon Iver, among others, although these days she is best known for writing some 20 songs for the hit ABC-TV



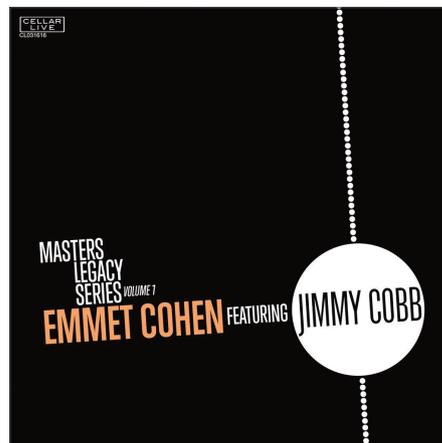
Becca Stevens

series *Nashville*. On earlier albums, especially her 2013 masterpiece, *Say it Louder*, she proved she is one of America's great songwriters. This new collection of songs strips down her art to its essence: her voice, which draws some of its emotional power from her sophisticated, original approach to melisma; her reverb-heavy, hollow-bodied electric guitar; and an excellent trio including husband Travis Book (of bluegrass sensation The Infamous Stringdusters) on bass and backing vocals and drummer Brian Caputo. All the songs are first-rate, but if I had to pick a favorite it would be "Not Enough," a new classic of drunken misery that should be a candidate for country song of the year.

Ordering info: sarahsiskind.com

Hiromi Suda's muse straddles the worlds of Japanese folk and bossa nova. On her album **Nagi (Blujazz; 46:26 ★★½)**—the title means "calm"—she displays a serene, quietly assured delivery. She couldn't have hired a better co-producer than the gifted jazz flutist Anne Drummond. They assembled a superb band including the great Romero Lubambo on guitar. The program is evenly split between Brazilian classics like Jobim's "Triste" and Donato's "A Rã," and her own poetic originals. Suda's vocals on the Brazilian tunes are finely calibrated and disarming. On the face of it, Japanese folk music and Brazilian music might seem to have little in common, but Suda makes it work. It's well worth hearing. **DB**

Ordering info: hiromisuda.com



Emmet Cohen *Masters Legacy Series Volume 1*

CELLAR LIVE 031616

★★★★½

Emmet Cohen has plenty of experience performing with top-tier musicians, including his membership in Christian McBride's Special Trio and sideman credits with the likes of Kurt Elling and Herlin Riley. But when the twenty-something pianist chanced upon playing with the great drummer Jimmy Cobb, he experienced something special: a profundity he felt could only come from communing with an elder architect of modern jazz.

Not wanting the honeymoon to end, Cohen invited Cobb to be his featured guest on this trio recording that's intended to be the first in a series of collaborations with jazz statesmen.

Cohen's playing springs from tradition. Favoring swinging phrasing and concise melodic arcs colored by a rich harmonic vocabulary, the tasteful pianist never lets his nimble, cleanly articulated technique overflow into clutter. His music's uplifting attitude is frequently colored with wit.

The legendary drummer, of course, boasts an exhaustive discography with the greats, crowned by his numerous classics with Miles Davis, including *Sketches Of Spain* and the watershed *Kind Of Blue*. Cobb possesses the drummer's grail of perfect pulse placement, which can launch bands to swing heaven. His famed cymbal ride urges bands forward while simultaneously offering a relaxed, gracious foundation. The icing is his smooth sound and elegant understatement. A spry 87 at the time of this tracking, Cobb also delivers ample fire when stepping out during trades and solos.

Though there are six decades between Cohen and his honored guest, the twain do indeed meet.

—Jeff Potter

Masters Legacy Series Volume 1: On The Trail; Tin Tin Deo; Two Bass Hit; When I Fall In Love; Folk Song; Interlude; Flamingo; If This Isn't Love; Mr. Robinson; Hard Times; Concerto For Cobb. (69:17)
Personnel: Emmet Cohen, piano; Jimmy Cobb, drums; Yasushi Nakamura, acoustic bass; Godwin Louis, alto saxophone (5, 10).

Ordering info: cellarlive.com