

Alexis Cole Digs Disney

Hearing Voices Column By Christopher Loudon
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When I reviewed vocalist Alexis Coles excellent Zingaro in the November 2007 issue of JazzTimes, I noted how unfortunate it is that Cole, like so many underappreciated American jazz singers, has earned only a fraction of the popularity in her native land that she enjoys in Japan. Since then, Cole delivered one domestic release, the fine seasonal album *The Greatest Gift*, much praised by JazzTimes editor-in-chief Lee Mergner last December in his annual Holiday CD Roundup. Then it was back to Japan for *Someday My Prince Will Come*, a smart,

compelling collection of Disney-related tunes.

Actually, *Someday My Prince Will Come* was recorded in New York, under the direction of Tetsuo Hara, founder of the Tokyo-based Venus label. Hara has arguably done more for more American jazz artists including Eddie Higgins (cornerstone of the Venus catalog), Bill Charlap, Steve Kuhn, Brian Lynch, Ken Peplowski, Kenny Barron, Phil Woods and an impressive list of vocalists that extends from Marilyn Scott to Tessa Souter - than just about any other jazz connoisseur outside the States. His standards are among the industrys highest. Hence the sterling musicians chosen to surround Cole: Fred Hersch on piano, Matt Wilson on drums, Don Braden (who also appears on *The Greatest Gift*) on saxes and flute, Steve LaSpina on bass and Gregoire Maret on harmonica.

The dual issues with Venus releases for collectors outside Japan are cost and availability. It is not uncommon for the U.S. retail price to soar above \$40; if, that is, you can find them. (One good source: the retail website eastwestimport.com the prices are still steep, but virtually the entire current Venus catalog, along with those of several other import labels, is available). Fortunately for Cole, *Someday My Prince Will Come* has found a U.S. distributor, so will soon be more widely, and more affordably, available.

Jazz interpretations of Disney tunes are hardly rare. Peggy Lee famously co-wrote the tunes for *Lady and the Tramp*, Steve Tyrell served up an entire platter of Disney material four years ago, *When You Wish Upon A Star* has been recorded dozens of times, *Sleeping Beautys* lilting *Once Upon a Dream* has long been a favorite among instrumentalists and, of course, the Miles Davis Sextet, featuring Hank Mobley and John Coltrane, made *Someday My Prince Will Come* indelibly its own in 1961.



But Cole and her esteemed playmates dig much deeper into the Disney treasure chest than any of their predecessors. Yes, the familiar title track is included, as is *When You Wish Upon a Star*. But much of the playlist demonstrates tremendous ingenuity.

The 1961 Disney hit *The Parent Trap* is best known for the jingly *Lets Get Together*, performed slightly off key by the engaging Hayley Mills. But there is a far better tune from that film, *For Now For Always*, a breezy, Sherman Brothers love song with a lovely lyric much enhanced by Coles burnished contralto. It is also just one of several tracks that showcases Coles easy sense of swing, strongly reminiscent of Sarah Vaughan. The equally winsome *Home Is Where the Heart Is* is surely the albums most obscure selection. It was featured in the animated TV series *Tale Spin* from the early 90s.

Both *Love* and *Let Me Good to You* are terrific songs from less-than-terrific films. The former is a sweet, bouncy concoction from 1973s *Robin Hood*. The latter, introduced by Melissa Manchester in 1986s *The Great Mouse Detective*, is a cunning number, nicely embroidered by Mares harmonica, delivered by Cole with vampish delight.

Though Hersch, with his masterfully light touch, shines throughout, his contributions to *Remember When*, from the original 1961 version of *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, are particularly stunning, and Cole responds with a reading that suggests Lee Wiley at her most insouciant. Herschs delicate majesty also provides ideal backing for Sammy Cahn and Sammy Fains enchanting *The Second Star from the Right* from *Peter Pan*, gorgeously interpreted by Cole with equal parts tenderness and wide-eyed expectation.

Interestingly, while other Disney songbook excavators have placed significant focus on more contemporary songs particularly the Academy Award-winning work of Alan Menken for *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin* and *The Little Mermaid* - Cole opts for just one piece of recent vintage. It too is from Menken (with Stephen Schwartz), from the 1985 animated hit *Pocahontas*. Though it was the films vibrant, showy *Colors of the Wind* that earned Oscars for Menken and Schwartz, Cole opts for the far gentler, and far more alluring, *If I Never Knew You*.

