

husband, Emilio, and pianist Shelly Berg (who also anchors the rhythm section). Many a similar project has been derailed by overproduction, the singer drowned in a tidal wave of strings and horns. Here, atop arrangements that are the epitome of restrained elegance, Estefan remains the sterling centerpiece.

ROBERTA GAMBARINI

THE SHADOW OF YOUR SMILE (Groovin' High)



Between 2006 and 2009, Italian émigré Roberta Gambarini delivered a trio of albums that earned her widespread plaudits as the

heir apparent to Ella or Sarah or both. Then ... a deafening silence. A trickle of fresh Gambarini material did appear last year with her four-track appearance on the Pratt Brothers Big Band's terrific *16 Men & a Chick Singer Swingin'*. Now, at last, Gambarini has released a new (if slightly difficult to obtain) disc.

The album was recorded in New Jersey earlier this year with an ace quartet of saxophonist/flutist Justin Robinson, pianist George Cables, bassist John Webber and drummer Victor Lewis. But you won't find it at your local CD outlet. Like the majority of her vocalist peers, Gambarini has an enormous following in Japan. The affection is mutual, and *The Shadow of Your Smile* is her exclusive *billet-doux* to them. (It is even subtitled *Hommage [sic] to Japan.*)

And fortunate the Japanese are, for this is Gambarini's finest outing to date, her plush, round notes and pearlescent tone shown to superb advantage. The mood is generally mellow, with lithe readings of "Someone to Watch Over Me," "Embraceable You," "Poor Butterfly," "My One and Only Love" and the haunting title track plus a double-dip into the Carpenters' songbook for "Close to You" and "Rainy Days and Mondays." But she also gives her chops a healthy workout on a down-'n'-dirty "Moanin'," a scat-infused "Satin Doll" and a breezy "Fly Me to the Moon" that's at once Sassy-warm and Sinatra-cool.

STACEY KENT

THE CHANGING LIGHTS (Warner)



Six years ago, Stacey Kent strayed from the all-standards path with the multifarious *Breakfast on the Morning Tram*, taking her

artistry to an exciting new level. Now, following detours for the all-French *Raconte-moi* and her first live album, Kent

returns to the *Tram* blueprint: a bit of pop, several Brazilian selections, a soupçon of French and clever originals composed by her husband, saxophonist Jim Tomlinson, with lyrics by novelist Kazuo Ishiguro. Kent and Tomlinson (as producer and principal arranger) have clearly hit on a winning formula.

Extending from the sweet simmer of "This Happy Madness" to the chill dismissal of "How Insensitive," the half-dozen Brazilian tracks are exquisite. New among them, written by Tomlinson and Portuguese poet Antonio Ladeira, are "Mais Uma Vez," a twinkling, ruminative gem, and the silken "A Tarde," which finds Kent in the sole company of legendary guitarist Roberto Menescal.

Ishiguro is to Kent what Cahn and Van Heusen were to Sinatra: a crafter of musical playlets that fit the singer like bespoke tailoring. His "Waiter, Oh Waiter" is a delightful trifle about a restaurant patron struggling with the arrogance of haute cuisine. The bittersweet "The Summer We Crossed Europe in the Rain" continues his penchant for travel themes, tracing a wistful attempt to renew faded romance. But his tour de force is the title track, a beautifully constructed parable about youthful ideals, the ardor they ignite and the inevitable concessions, rationalizations and regrets that follow.

ABIGAIL RICCARDS

EVERY LITTLE STAR (Abigail Riccards)



Abigail Riccards has, across a decade-long career, mastered the increasingly endangered art of making less more. Her tone is crystalline, her

phrasing crisp and her style lissome, its seeming effortlessness masking sharp interpretive skills. Think Doris Day with Anita O'Day's jazz smarts.

Navigating 11 standards plus Chicago trumpeter/vocalist Jeannie Tanner's "Endless Joy," Riccards surrounds herself with players—guitarist Peter Bernstein, pianist Michael Kanan, bassist Neal Miner, drummer Eliot Zigmund—who embrace and enhance her nimble subtlety. She is a fine midtempo swinger, serving up sparkling renditions of "I've Told Every Little Star," "If I Had You" and "Waltz for Debby," and a loose, scat-peppered "I Can't Give You Anything But Love." And she can turn up the heat when appropriate, as on a blistering "Bye Bye Blackbird." But it is as a balladeer that she shines brightest, perfectly capturing the cozy satisfaction of "I Didn't Know

About You" and the budding joy of "Smile," and enfolding the typically ebullient "Singin' in the Rain" in soft contentment.

For her debut album released in 2007, Riccards enlisted Dena DeRose as her producer. This time, she's recruited Jane Monheit. They share one track, swapping choruses and ultimately twining on Joni Mitchell's "The Circle Game." The juxtaposition is interesting, with Monheit's more mannered approach played against Riccards' unadorned purity.

VENISSA SANTI

BIG STUFF: AFRO CUBAN HOLIDAY (Sunnyside)



Many American jazz singers have explored Afro-Cuban grooves, though few with the authenticity of Venissa Santi.

She began embracing her Cuban heritage while teaching at Philadelphia's Asociacion de Musicos Latino Americanos, subsequently releasing the rumba- and bolero-fueled *Bienvenida* in 2009.

Santi's sophomore disc, inspired by her participation in a Billie Holiday salute that featured her alongside Kurt Elling, Sheila Jordan, Lizz Wright and Claudia Acuña, is a bracing Afro-Cuban exploration of the Holiday catalog. Though her phrasing occasionally echoes Holiday's, she carves a far different stylistic path, favoring a misty coolness that plays superbly against the often-fiery arrangements conceived by percussionist François Zayas.

Opening with a loose *guaguancó* take on "On the Sunny Side of the Street," Santi ups the heat with a sizzling *tumba* reading of the title tune. Her *makuta*-styled "My Man," percolating with jagged urgency, makes way for a "Strange Fruit" reimagined as a muted bolero. "Trav'lin' Light" can be interpreted darkly or lightly with equal effectiveness; Santi opts for the latter, transforming it into a free-spirited *danzón*. African *palo* influences shape her thundering "Stormy Weather," offset by a sultry "You Better Go Now."

The least familiar track is Jack Reardon's "Involved Again," a song that Holiday adored but never got to record. It proves to be Santi's *pièce de résistance*, a masterful blend of woe and longing.

JANIS SIEGEL

NIGHTSONGS (Palmetto)



Manhattan Transfer alto Janis Siegel's first solo album in seven years is a valentine to interpretive artistry built around love songs old and