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Coming at life from a very different angle

On her new album, *Life Is Funny That Way*, singer **Fay Victor** is on a mission to put the music of maverick 1950s pianist Herbie Nichols into the mainstream. **Kevin Le Gendre** talks to her about this most unusual passion project

What might be known as 'the Great Alternative Songbook' has significant entries. Counter-standards, songs played far more seldom today than, say, Jerome Kern's 'Yesterdays', have come from the pen of writers who have not had the highest of profiles for any number of reasons. Playing in a way that bucked convention puts them on the fringes, as does the knack of writing themes that beguile. But that singularity is exactly why they matter.

Herbie Nichols, the 'swing into bebop and beyond' pianist who made visionary music in the 1950s, is a prime example. Vocalist Fay Victor recalls that it was a shock to the system when she first heard him: "A lot of the compositions went way over my head, except for 'House Party Starting', that was the one that immediately got its hooks into me. I decided I wanted to sing it. At that moment I wasn't a good enough vocalist to sing that song but it was a beautiful challenge to work on. A couple of years later I started what I would say was my first serious band with a strange repertoire; we'd do things like Eric Dolphy's 'Out To Lunch' or Mingus' 'Better Git It In Your Soul', and 'House Party'.

For those unfamiliar with Nichols' music, Victor's framing of him with Dolphy and Mingus is instructive insofar as all three, individual as they were, were at the cutting edge of modernism that had straddled post-bop and avant-garde schools. Fittingly, Victor would also put Thelonious Monk among these names as she reminisces about discovering Nichols. Her engagement with the pianist was anything but superficial because she formed the group Herbie Nichols Sung, to, as the name suggests, set his music to words, as can be heard on the fine current album *Life Is Funny That Way*.

Leading a band that features drummer Tom Rainey, bassist Ratz Harris, pianist Anthony Coleman and saxophonist Michael Attias, Victor brilliantly negotiates the circuitous melodies and uncommon harmonies of the source material, but above all captures the boldly spontaneous, often teasingly playful character of the writing,

"I'm a little nuts in that I like learning difficult music," she says on a Zoom call from the Performing Arts faculty of the New School in Brooklyn where she teaches. "It's not only a lot of fun but inadvertently it developed so many things about my ear, my vocal technique. You have to take care in what you

are doing, when you are singing certain pitches and how to connect them consistently. There is a lot of whimsy and joy and I wanted to tap into that definitely. I wanted that to be a facet of whatever came out. And the lyrics came out song by song... these melodies are singable, maybe not in an obvious way. As you say, they feel off-the-cuff and improvised."

Writing words that are both enigmatic and emotive, as a choice couplet from 'Sinners, All of Us!' shows - "To preach like mad in charismatic green/We listen in awe and stomp for more" - Victor makes it clear that she has met the high creative bar set by Nichols. That said, the singer's substantial body of work, stretching back some 30 years, includes releases that attest to her talent, such as *Darker Than Blue*, which has a version of 'House Party Starting', *Lazy Old Sun* and *Embrace*, for which she was part of a supergroup led by trombone legend Roswell Rudd. Victor has also worked with fearless improvisers such as guitarist Anders Nilsson and saxophonist Darius Jones. Blessed with a strength of tone and mercurial turn of phrase, the singer has a keen interest in exploring the relationship between instrumental and vocal music.

"When I was a budding vocalist, Carmen McCrae did a Monk record and that opened up Monk to so many people who may not have either heard his music or considered that his music could be vocal-led at all," she comments. "So part of the big impetus was to open Herbie's music up to another audience. The interesting thing is that within academia (where I work) a lot of students have definitely heard of him."

Victor's engagement with the artist also has a more personal cultural motivation.

"The other reason why Herbie Nichols is so important to me is that he was half Trinidadian, as am I," she says with an audible flush of pride in her voice.

"One of the things I've always loved about being from that culture, is this sort of real intellectual rigour while at the same time not taking oneself too seriously, and that's something I sort of find meshed in Herbie Nichols' music. I wanted to amplify the blackness that was coming out of that space and how being cerebral connects with the humour, like they just can be part of the same thing. As far as I know this project is the first one led by an African-American artist and that's important, especially with the sensibility of the Caribbean,

although he, like myself, was raised in New York."

Victor came to address her heritage in 2011 when she guested with Other Dimensions In Music, an ensemble jointly led by Daniel Carter, William Parker, Roy Campbell and Charles Downs, and made *Kaiso Stories*. "That was me trying to amplify the beauty of calypso lyrics," she says. "I still feel very connected to that part of the world. I was in Trinidad a lot as a kid, I have a sense of what that culture feels like."

As much as she identifies as an African-American Caribbean Victor is keen to point out that Amsterdam, where she lived between the late 1990s and mid 2000s was a key stage in her artistic journey. She formed a creative bond with pianist-composer Misha Mengelberg, a major figure in the history of the Dutch avant-garde, and would also have the privilege of performing with the equally revered group ICP (Instant Composers Pool) whose members included Han Bennink, Ab Baars and Willem Breuker. These individuals were stimulating but so too, as many of her compatriots from previous generations found, such as Michael Moore and Mary Oliver, was the change of environment. Victor came to appreciate a different atmosphere and outlook.

"I was trying to figure out a place where I could develop," she explains. "I was very serious about jazz, I was living in New York city and didn't think it was the best place to shed. I had to eat first off, and secondly it was just so competitive. So I wanted to go somewhere else and figure it out. I ended up in the Netherlands and that turned out to be just amazing in the sense that I had a lot of time and space to figure things out."

Victor kept steadily pursuing her own path in the 2010s and 20s, and her body of work, that includes membership of Anthony Braxton's unique Syntactical GTM Choir, marks her out as an artist who has wrought originality from the depths of jazz history. Nothing could be more appropriate than the singer covering the music of a maverick such as Herbie Nichols, whose life had surprises as well as struggles.

"It was actually a miracle that Herbie ever landed on Blue Note, based on his career which was basically non-existent," she says with a wry chuckle. "I know he had his advocates, Mingus really advocated for him. I guess *Life Is Funny That Way* taps into the larger reason we do what we do and maybe we don't know why. This artist ended up on Blue Note and so many people are smitten with him; look at how funny that is." ■

Life Is Funny That Way is out now on Tao Forms

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