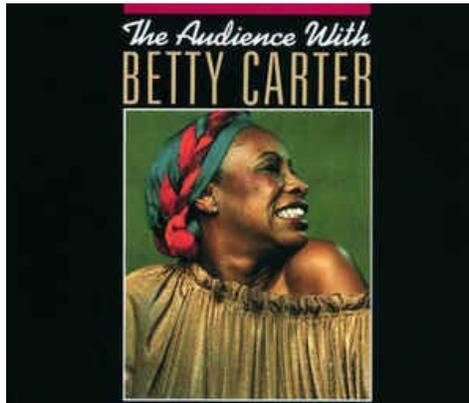


“The Audience with Betty Carter”—Betty Carter (1980)

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Essay by William R. Bauer, Ph.D. (guest post)*



The Audience with Betty Carter

This two-disk album recorded live at San Francisco’s Great American Music Hall on December 6, 7, 8, 1979, documents a shining moment in the career of the highly idiosyncratic and defiantly independent female jazz artist Betty Carter. No mere rhetorical ploy, the record’s title reflects the singer’s deep commitment to her audience and appreciation for the ways they supported her work on all levels, from commercial to aesthetic. Every track exudes the craftsmanship and artistry that have kept her faithful listeners coming back time and again. But it wasn’t only her music that they sought out. In an art form that, following Miles Davis’s aloof example, had literally and figuratively turned its back on *its* audience, her showmanship has always set her apart. As with her idol, Louis Armstrong, Betty Carter did not distinguish between the roles of entertainer and artist. And listeners’s reactions, evident on several of these tracks, reveal their delight in the strands of rapport with which she so exquisitely drew them into her world. Carter fiercely respected her audience’s intelligence; and, when it came to the music, she refused to compromise her high standards. But she also knew how to work the crowd.

This recording invites us into that world, too, magically transforming us into members of “The Audience.” On up-tempo rhythm numbers—represented here with dramatically reworked versions of standards, both well known, such as “My Favorite Things” and “The Trolley Song,” and obscure, such as “Deep Night”—she toys with us, keeping us on the edge of our seats awaiting the next revelation. In ballads such as “Spring Can Really Hang You Up The Most,” taken at outrageously slow tempos, she brings us down into the depths of profoundly intimate moments, enlisting us as co-conspirators in that world.

For the fortunate few who were present on those historic nights, she put her money where her voice was: in addition to giving each audience member a rose at the show, she mailed them a copy of the recording upon its release. Yet as precious as this sound document of her performance is, it can only hint at the electrifying impact Betty Carter had on her live audiences. She embodied the charge, ascribed to Martha Graham, to be not larger than life, but “as large as life.” Her striking figure, stylishly clad, and her bold stage presence all contributed mightily to this affect, to be sure, as did her habit of prowling the stage aggressively, gesturing and gesticulating, in part to cue her youthful trio and alert them to the musical hairpin turns in store for them just ahead. However, while there is no way to reduce the alchemy that produced Carter’s uniquely compelling presence to the sum of all her gloriously moving parts, the recording enables her to reach out to us now, across time and space, and evoke that presence. And so, in listening, we feel we are there with her, enjoying her at the height of her creative powers as she works her magic.

The highly original material she created as composer-arranger is well represented here in several charts, most powerfully in her rendering of “Sounds (Movin’ On),” a 25-minute showcase for her immense talents, not only as singer-songwriter, but also as an improvising scat singer. The distinction between these roles is not always obvious. On the basis of a scatted segment from this track, she would later build an original song, a ballad that became the title track of her Grammy awarded 1984 recording “Look What I Got.” “Sounds (Movin’ On)”’s epic, episodic form, warranted by her lyrics’ restless call to action, takes her and her trio on a long, circuitous narrative journey, traveling through a series of abruptly introduced tempos and meters, including a segment in five-beat time, and doubling back to her title theme several times. Carter puts herself and her trio through their paces. Indeed, the work poses the kind of musical challenges that savvy jazz audiences have come to expect instrumentalists and singers alike to face and surpass, in part because of Carter’s innovative example. But, at the time, such challenges were all but unheard of, especially in singers. Other original compositions featured on “The Audience” demonstrate Carter’s uncanny knack for expressing herself and conveying her distinctive *personal style in the bop idiom that was her stock in trade and mother tongue*.

The success of “The Audience’s” original release on BetCar Records, the record company Carter had launched ten years earlier, prefigured and precipitated her rise to fame and fortune, such as it was. For all the celebrity she attained thereafter, Betty Carter never did become a household name. Having plied her trade in relative obscurity during the decades leading up to this recording, she was prepared to accept the constraints market forces placed on her achievements, because she refused to take her eyes from the prize. It never was about the money: it was all for the music and her faithful audience. Yet even amid the tribulations and trials she faced, Carter helped spark the Bebop Revival that emerged in the ‘70s and ‘80s, proving through sheer force of will that the rumors of jazz’s death had been greatly exaggerated.

And so this recording also stands as a testament to her indefatigable efforts to keep jazz alive in the wake of the tidal wave of rock music that hit the commercial music industry in the 1960s. Betty Carter did so not only by consistently producing the high level of work reflected on this album, but also by hiring young sidemen (they were almost exclusively male) and schooling them in the rigorous ways of improvised jazz performance at the professional level. The personnel backing her on this record, which boasted John Hicks on piano, Curtis Lundy on bass, and Kenny Washington on drums, exemplifies her commitment to nurturing jazz culture from the grass roots up, as did the jazz ahead program she created much later, a program for developing young talent that continues to this day at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC.

In retrospect, it seems Betty Carter was bound to pay dues until her death in 1998, so determined was she to make it on her own terms in an industry notoriously hostile to individuality—especially from women. As she put it in her first foray into songwriting: “I can’t help it; that’s the way that I am.” Yet, while she fought throughout much of her 50-year career to gain widespread acceptance for her highly original jazz concept, she had long been acknowledged by her peers as the jazz vocal art’s most compelling—and most convincing—representative of her generation. Deemed “a singer’s singer” by her colleagues, fans, and critics, she also earned high praise, owing to her gifts as an improviser, composer, and an arranger, and as a musician’s musician—a status players rarely, if ever, extend to vocalists.

Carter produced “The Audience” in a period when rock stars with no jazz background to speak of, most prominently Joni Mitchell and Linda Ronstadt, presumed to sing jazz. So she had ample reason to assert her rightful claims to authenticity. With deep roots in the vibrant jazz scene of Detroit, where she grew up in the 1930s and ‘40s, she was the real deal. And she knew she was a tough act to follow. Confident in her authority, she once audaciously, yet wistfully declared “after me, there are no jazz singers.”

Consistent with her criticism of the jazz-rock fusion artists she accused of selling out—and she took no less than Miles Davis to task for his commercially successful “Bitches Brew”—Carter took her underground status during the 1970s in stride. Indeed, undeterred by her lack of acceptance by the general public, she brandished this status as a badge of honor. To such a degree, in fact, that, as she gained publicity from her increasingly busy international touring schedule during the 1970s, she grew suspicious, quipping to a reporter that he should not consider her newfound celebrity a “resurgence” since she hadn’t ever had a “surge” to begin with. And so, if the devoted cult following heralded in the album’s title were to celebrate the “The Audience’s” inclusion in the Library of Congress registry of recorded music with just a hint of irony, their fidelity to her iconoclastic legacy should not keep us from savoring the recognition her work is receiving here.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.