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**April 20, 2007**

LISTENING WITH DIANNE REEVES

## Looking Beyond the Phrasing, to the Spirit

By [BEN RATLIFF](#)

DENVER — “It’s been cold here lately,” Dianne Reeves said this month, readying plates of food for a late lunch, “so I decided to make some lamb.” She laid out the meal on the center island of her kitchen here, including sweet iced tea made from hibiscus leaves brought home from Turkey and cornbread that she has been perfecting, trying to replicate a version she admired at a local restaurant. Explaining how she likes to cook, she said: “It’s the same thing with how I sing. I work with my ear and try to make it feel right, or I just keep changing it until I like the way it tastes.”

So does every musician. But from Dianne Reeves this formula sounds excessively humble. Ms. Reeves isn’t stumbling around in the dark; she has the training, the tools, the instrument. Hers is a big and forthright voice, one that sounds as if it might have been trained over the blare of a touring big band, except that such a model hardly exists anymore.

She is a jazz singer who has absorbed some of the loftiest and most difficult models: Sarah Vaughan, Betty Carter, Shirley Horn. She treats standards with skyscraper authority, drawing a circle of repertory wide enough to include material from her favorite singer-songwriters; she has her own vocal and performance devices, subdividing vowels into a dozen notes, pouring forth welcomes and singsong advice to her audience.

Her most recent record, which won her a fourth Grammy Award, was the soundtrack to the 2005 film “Good Night, and Good Luck,” in which she climbs into the 1950s without affectation. On it she performs standards with a small backing group, a setup reasonably close to the one she will use tonight and tomorrow at [Jazz at Lincoln Center](#)’s Allen Room. (Her trio will consist of the pianist Billy Childs, the bassist Reginald Veal and the drummer Gregory Hutchinson.) But she has also become known for her own songs, often concerned with, as she puts it, “telling stories”; they hit a gently counseling chord, encouraging pride and self-reliance.

She has been a long time forming. The present version of Dianne Reeves comes after 30 years of wending among swing-based jazz, West Coast pop-jazz of the 1980s and versions of black-diaspora songs and bossa nova from jobs with [Harry Belafonte](#) and Sergio Mendes. And before that, a lot of church singing.

Yet Ms. Reeves seems firmly of a place and time: the middle of America, and the middle of the 20th century. This comes out in her manners but also in her preoccupation with spirituality, and with a protective psychology that can accommodate frailty and self-doubt.

Last fall she turned 50. Since 1991 she has lived on a well-tended stretch of a well-traveled thoroughfare in the Park Hill neighborhood of Denver, five minutes from her mother (who still lives in the house where Ms. Reeves grew up) and not too much farther from her sister. She was home recently only for a brief stop between tours, but as friends and relatives came in and out of the kitchen through the afternoon, she seemed rooted.

Born in Detroit, she moved to Denver with her mother and her sister at the age of 2, after the death of her father. Her grandmother, Denverada Howard, was born in Denver in 1896 and named after the city, and her grandmother's father was a founding member of the oldest black church here, Shorter Community A.M.E. church in East Denver.

Ms. Reeves belonged to that church but also went to Roman Catholic school with daily Mass and attended a Baptist church on Sunday. "For us as kids," she said, "we had the feeling that there was nothing we couldn't do or deal with, because we believed in God and we believed that God would make a way."

A test came during the first school busing experiments in Denver, when Ms. Reeves was sent down the same road she now lives on, far into South Denver, to a white junior high school. It was a tense period: Parents of the white children wanted the black children out, and there were racist editorials in the local paper. In retaliation the school's black, Texan music teacher organized a revue that combined the poetry of [Langston Hughes](#) and songs like "Blowin' in the Wind," "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother" and "Joy, Joy" by the Edwin Hawkins Singers.

"It was a powerful thing, and it served to bring people together," she said. "It really changed my life. I really understood that I wanted to sing songs that meant something to me."

Asked to listen to and comment on some music of her choosing, Ms. Reeves put forward Aretha Franklin first. "Amazing Grace," Ms. Franklin's live gospel album, released in 1972, was a record that hit Ms. Reeves hard in high school; at the time she was singing Franklin hits with a group of friends who called themselves the Mellow Moods.

"Every time one of her new songs came out, you'd learn it," she said. "But when this came out, it was, like, ahhh. On the album cover she had her hair all tied up, and she had African attire on, sitting in front of the church."

On "Mary Don't You Weep," Ms. Franklin at first sounds serene — "We're going to review the story of the two sisters, Mary and Martha," she begins — and then the choir starts applying pressure over a slow tempo, making its refrain eerily quiet, occasionally bursting out to high volume.

"Listen to the backgrounds," Ms. Reeves said, and she started banging her hand on the table to the one-two-three of the chorus's clapping. Ms. Franklin enters into a complex series of actions with the band and the choir, half rehearsed, half spontaneous. She invokes Lazarus three times; the third time she hollers, and the choir goes off like a siren.

"It's the spirit," Ms. Reeves said. "It's what she knew about. For the people in the congregation it's a statement of faith and belief. But it's also that whole thing of 'Let's gather around, and I'm going to tell you this amazing story.'"

This is gospel music straight up and down, though. Listening to Ms. Franklin's phrasing and the pacing of her emotional involvement, does Ms. Reeves get lessons that she can apply to, say, "How High the Moon"?

"Oh, absolutely," she said. "It's timing. It's that thing that just makes your spirit rise — that ability to really savor words and savor a story."

Ms. Reeves likes talking about music that isn't specific to one generation. "The majority of the stuff I listened to, my parents listened to — until I started listening to Parliament-Funkadelic," she said.

She next chose a track from the 1964 recording “Sam Cooke at the Copa,” another taste she shared with her mother and stepfather. It was the medley of “Try a Little Tenderness,” “(I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons” and “You Send Me,” and it was as much vamping as song playing. As with the Aretha Franklin record, Cooke constantly turns to talking-through-singing to engage his audience through transitions. This was a trick Ms. Reeves learned early on, as a performer in high school, especially with her uncle, a bassist with the Denver Symphony who played jazz at his Unitarian Church, and in club dates with the pianist Gene Harris, who moved to Denver when she was a high school junior. She hated the spaces between songs, and she needed to figure out what to do about them.

At first Cooke sounds as if he’s stalling: “Oh I never, never/I never, never, never, never, never treat you wrong darling,” he sings.

He frames these vamps as meta-songs: He’s singing them to the men in the audience, he says, because men “have a tendency to neglect the ladies.” And as he sings he puts the lyrics in quotation marks, recasting them as mollifying speeches men can deliver to their women. He improvises through the vamping, and he cues the band when he’s ready to enter the song. “And also, you have to tell her, ‘Darling, you send me,’ ” he sings, conversationally. “I wouldn’t tell you if I didn’t mean it’ — that works,” he jokes. “You thrill me, honest you do.’ ”

Why is that performance such an ideal for Ms. Reeves? It could be considered Cooke just doing business, running through teasers on the way to a surer set-piece. “Because he’s standing right on the edge,” she answered. “He’s thinking, he’s forming the words in his mouth. I can tell, because I’ve been there.”

There were other reasons too. “He’s so classy. Yeah, that whole idea was you go out onstage and you entertain. You don’t bring that other craziness. You bring your joy, and you tell them stories.”

“And he’s communicating to the band vocally when to start each song,” she added. We went back to a few moments just before the band begins “Try a Little Tenderness.” “He just cued them,” she said, then pointed out another critical moment, just before “You Send Me,” where some flutes create a kind of path to the song’s entry.

How do we know that in some cases the band isn’t cueing him? “Well, in that last case — maybe, I don’t know,” she said. “You’d have to see it. But that’s all part of gospel singing, cueing. And I really think he was in control.”

On the outside Ms. Reeves would seem to have little in common with Shirley Horn, who loved slow tempos and nearly whispered her songs. Ms. Reeves chose to listen to “Here’s to Life,” from Horn’s 1992 record of the same name. Horn was a passionate singer, but tough and concise, with a kind of Bogart sibilance. She played piano as well, using those harmonies as an extension of her voice. As we listened, Ms. Reeves copied the tiniest details of the vocal performance: the little “mm” added to the end of the line “so give it all you got” in the first verse; the tiny, sharp intake of breath after the line “and all that’s good get better,” toward the end.

“If you broke it down, you could say it was her phrasing,” Ms. Reeves said. “But it’s beyond phrasing. It’s breathing life into an inanimate object. The first time she says, ‘Here’s to love,’ she pulls back. She makes it very tender and simple. The second time she says, ‘Here’s to love,’ the ‘love’ is bigger. She has this picture into something. Shirley does that. Nina Simone does that. Carmen McRae does that. If they say ‘love’ in a certain way, they can mean it sarcastically, or like they’re passionately in love with you, and you’ll understand it.

“When you listen to her you start to understand what the voice is,” she continued. “When I’m working with students, I ask them, putting a ‘great voice’ at the bottom of the list, what do you think makes a great singer? It’s obvious with her, and with Aretha, that it’s your spirit.”

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