

Helen Merrill with Dick Katz - The Feeling Is Mutual (1965)

Written by bluesever

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1. *You're my thrill* 2. *It don't mean a thing* 3. *Here's that rainy day* [play](#) 4. *Baltimore Oriole*
5. *Don't explain* [pl](#)

[ay](#)

6. *What is this thing called love?* 7. *The winter of my discontent* 8. *Day Dreams* 9. *Deep in a dream*

Personnel: Dick Katz - Piano Ron Carter - Bass Thad Jones - Cornet Arnie Wise, Pete La Roca - Drums Jim Hall – Guitar

Helen Merrill is the Frank Stella of jazz singing. But, as with Stella, minimalism should not be equated with nihilism. Merrill's cool, parched style is often wrongly dismissed as gray and vacant. But beneath that densely fogged patina lays a rainbow of expression and a jazz acumen as acute as Carmen McRae's or Kurt Elling's.

Unfortunately, though Merrill surely ranks among the finest and most perceptive American vocalists of the past half-century, with nearly 50 albums to her credit, she has fared dimly in terms of domestic reissues. Yes, Mercury Records admirably assembled her entire EmArcy output from the mid- and late-'50s—five albums that placed her in the company of Clifford Brown, Gil Evans, Milt Hinton, Kenny Dorham and Jimmy Jones—in a four-disc box, but that set is now out of print. And yes, several of the superb discs she released on various labels throughout the '60s, '70s and '80s have surfaced in Japan and Europe, but most are now either unavailable or restrictively expensive.

So kudos to Mosaic for making a small but very welcome dip into the Merrill catalog. The single-disc Helen Merrill-Dick Katz Sessions combines two of her best from the latter half of the 1960s, both fashioned in New York by producer-arranger-pianist Dick Katz for the Milestone label. The first nine tracks, recorded in June 1965 with Katz, cornetist Thad Jones, bassist Ron

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Carter and drummers Pete LaRoca and Arnie Wise, were originally released as The Feeling Is Mutual. The other 10 tracks followed three years later, with the ensemble, now featuring Elvin Jones on drums, expanded to include Gary Bartz on alto sax, Hubert Laws on flute and Jim Hall on guitar, and were released as A Shade of Difference.

Both sessions not only capture the spare wistfulness of Merrill's haunted style at its absolute peak but, courtesy of Katz's brilliant charts, place her in some of the most startlingly original, offbeat settings of her entire career. Merrill is expectedly dazzling as she plumbs the stark desolation of "Here's That Rainy Day," "The Winter of My Discontent" and Ornette Coleman's "Lonely Woman," and shapes what is arguably the definitive version of "Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most." But she proves equally sublime showing off a lighter, brighter side with dreamily romantic readings of "My Funny Valentine," "Lover Come Back to Me" and "Deep in a Dream," silkily playful sojourns through "Never Will I Marry" and Rodgers and Hart's too-rarely heard "A Lady Must Live" and a "Baltimore Oriole" that rivals the precocity of Sheila Jordan's.

The second Mosaic disc, Casa Forte, moves the clock forward to 1980, though Merrill's voice shows nary a shred of deterioration. Working with her husband-to-be, arranger/pianist Torrie Zito, Merrill fills half of the 10 tracks with familiar selections from the Brazilian songbook, including gems from Jobim ("Wave," "How Insensitive"), Caymmi ("Like a Lover"), Mendes ("So Many Stars") and Nascimento ("Vera Cruz"). The balance comprises a mood-shifting pastiche of Michael Franks ("Antonio's Song"), Johnny Mercer ("Too Marvelous for Words"), Johnny Mandel ("Close Enough for Love") and Lan O'Kun (the shimmering "Natural Sounds," which opens the album). Again, top-drawer players, including guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli, drummer Grady Tate, bassist George Mraz and trombonist Urbie Green, surround Merrill. Zito's arrangements are no match for Katz's astounding inventiveness, but fully recognize that Merrill is best served on a bed of the finest Jacquard satin as woven by the very best jazz craftsmen.

Now, if only Mosaic would excavate further and unearth Chasin' the Bird from '79 with Katz and Pepper Adams, or 1971's S'posin' with Gary Peacock, or her '87 reunion with Gil Evans on Collaboration or Helen Sings, Teddy Swings with Teddy Wilson from 1970, or ... well, the list of buried Merrill treasures is almost endless. ---Christopher Loudon, jazztimes.com

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