

Helen Merrill - Sings The Beatles (1970)

Written by bluesever

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1. *Let it Be* 2. *Lady Madonna* 3. *Because* 4. *The Word* 5. *Norwegian Wood* 6. *Here There and Everywhere* 7. *Golden Slumbers* 8. *And I Love Him* 9. *In My Life* 10. *Mother Nature's Son* 11. *If I Fell* 12. *I Want You* Helen Merrill - Vocals Masahiko Sato - Piano, Arranger Yasuo Arakawa - Bass Takeshi Inomata - Drums

Helen Merrill's dark, smoky voice and rangy interpretive powers gave her the opportunity to shine with many types of material; for this 1970 date she leads a small Japanese group celebrating the Lennon/McCartney canon, in an experiment that's not merely successful but immensely pleasurable. The material focuses on two distinct Beatles periods (1965-1966 and 1968-1969), and Merrill studiously avoids many of the standards that older artists were then latching onto. ("Something," the consummate Beatles standard for non-rock vocalists, is conspicuously absent.) Instead, Merrill dwells on McCartney and Lennon as masters of lyrical, introspective songcraft, choosing for her tribute the drowsy, contemplative songs "Here, There and Everywhere," "And I Love Him," "Let It Be," "Golden Slumbers," "In My Life," and so forth. Most of the versions are stretched out by her small band, nearly always for good; only "The Word" sounds downright embarrassing in a brassy, jazz-funk arrangement. It's always Merrill's performances, though, that make this record a success. One of vocal music's finest free-form interpreters, she records versions neither rote nor experimental, ones that remember the originals but add much to their feel and harmonics (always an important quality when you face the prospect of covering 12 of the most memorized performances in recording history). Really, no other jazz vocalist could survive -- and thrive -- like this: recording abstract arrangements of a rock songbook in Tokyo in 1970 with a band whose easily dateable arrangements occasionally threaten their talent. She even finds subtle ways to succeed with the straight-ahead rocker "Lady Madonna." ---John Bush, Rovi

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