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MUSIC GROUP

Veronica Swift - *Veronica Swift*

Veronica Swift's new eponymously titled album, her third for Mack Avenue Records, is a masterful coming-out story. On her previous albums, *Confessions* (2019) and *This Bitter Earth* (2021), she ascended to the upper echelon of early 21st century jazz singers because of her virtuosic brilliance, interpretive ingenuity, bracing songwriting, and keen arrangements. Simply put, Swift is not only one of the most dazzling singers to emerge in her generation, she's one of the most versatile.

While her first two albums solidified her position in modern jazz, ***Veronica Swift*** shows that she's more than a jazz singer, exploring French and Italian opera, European classical music, bossa nova, blues, industrial rock, funk, and vaudeville. She pulls the feat off without the results sounding callow or pastiche. Swift's expansive artistic voice remains firmly intact regardless of genre.

Swift describes this personal artistic statement on her new album as being "transgenre." "I grew up a jazz singer. Because of the connection I have with my parents, I felt a duty to uphold and perform that music," she says, reflecting on her parents – jazz singer and educator Stephanie Nakasian and pianist Hod O'Brien. "But what I don't get to show people often is that it is really not my music, [even] as much as I'm deeply rooted in its tradition. I have always wanted to sing rock. That was the music that fueled my passion, as well as soul music and other genres. But I wanted to do it my way."

For the album, Swift enlists **Brian Viglione** of the punk cabaret duo The Dresden Dolls as drummer as well as c0-producer along with Swift and Mariano Aponte. Also on board is a motley crew of musicians that includes pianist, keyboardist and organist **Adam Klipple**, pianist **Randy Waldman**, guitarists **Chris Whiteman** and **Samson Schmitt**, percussionist **Luisito Quintero**, singer **Austin Patterson**, violinist and violist **Antoine Silverman**, violinist **Pierre Blanchard**, bassists **Phillip Norris, Alex Claffy**, **Antonio Licusati** and **Felix Maldonado**, saxophonists **Troy Roberts** and **David Leon**, trumpeters **Benny Benack III** and **James Sarno,** trombonist **Javier Nero**, accordionist **Ludovic Bier**, vocalist **Carolynne Framil**, and woodwindist and orchestrator **David Mann**.

The album ignites with the extravagant rendition of Jerry Herman's **"I Am What I Am"** from the Broadway musical *La Cage aux Folles*. Swift imbues the infectiously swinging tune with unfettered joy, especially when she launches into a sublime scat excursion that segues into a Johann Sebastian Bach-inspired fugue. For Swift, the song becomes a declaration of artistic freedom.

From there, she switches gears on her treatment of Nine Inch Nails' **"Closer"** that's anchored by an intricate Clyde Stubblefield-inspired drum pattern, reminiscent of his work on James Brown's epochal classic "Cold Sweat." As stabbing horns, pulverizing bass and energetic vocals join the fold, Swift channels her alt-rock sensibilities before surprisingly blasting off into another sensational scat passage. A celebration of carnal hunger, the song reflects not only

Swift's college years, singing in a funk band, the razor-sharp arrangement alludes to her love of '90s industrial rock.

Veronica Swift grows even more ferocious with her gutsy treatment of Duke Ellington and Bob Russell's classic **"Do Nothing Till You Hear from Me,"** on which Whiteman's lacerating guitar licks channel both Jimi Hendrix and Albert King as Swift recasts the song into a Mississippi Delta blues burner.

The album simmers down with Swift's poignant extrapolation of the verse from Queen's **"The Show Must Go On,"** which she underpins with infectious Afro-Cuban rhythms. The song also serves as another example of her "transgenre" concept as she utilizes Nat King Cole's arrangement of Ruggero Leoncavallo's aria, "Vesti la Giubba," from his opera *Pagliacci*.

The album returns to Swift's love for American musical theater with the dramatic reading of Harry Carroll and Joseph McCarthy's vaudeville ballad **"I'm Always Chasing Rainbows,"** which is fused with Frédéric Chopin's "Fantasie-Impromptu." That gives way to **"In the Moonlight,"** a stunning torch ballad on which Swift adapts Ludwig van Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" and includes a hidden nod to Sergei Rachmaninoff's "Piano Concerto No. 2" harmonic structure on the choruses.

Swift continues with another magnificent original, **"Severed Heads,"** a gentle bossa containing snarky, amorous lyrics. Again Swift's brilliance as an arranger radiates through the melody, which incorporates fragments of Giacomo Puccini's "Perché Tarda la Luna?" from his 1924 opera, *Turandot* (originally adapted from the popular Chinese folk song "Mo Li Hua (Jasmine Flower Song)").

She demonstrates her mastery at singing in French and Portuguese, respectively, with her spine-tingling readings of Charles-François Gounod's aria, **"Je Veux Vivre,"** from his 1867 opera, *Roméo et Juliette*, and Antônio Carlos Jobim and Vinícius de Moraes' 1957 bossa nova gem **"Chega de Saudade."**

Swift returns to the hard rock canon with a winning cover of Queen's 1973 anthem **"Keep Yourself Alive"** before closing the multifaceted album with a punk rendition of Bob Merrill and Jule Styne's **"Don't Rain on My Parade"** from the 1964 musical *Funny Girl*.

Swift first gained major international attention in 2015 when she won second place in the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz International Vocals Competition. Four years later, Mack Avenue Records released her acclaimed album *Confessions* when she was only 25 years old. She demonstrated her flair for conceptual song cycles on her follow-up album, *This Bitter Earth,* which not only gave glimpses of her rock influences but thematically touched upon some of the harder truths of being a woman, particularly when it comes to domestic abuse.

Swift says that for her new album she'd been exploring her "transgenre" concept for about two-and-half years. During the Covid-19 pandemic, she strategized the unveiling of this more artistically naked version of herself to the public while being mindful of how conservative the mainstream jazz industry can be.

"The jazz music industry tends to be very closed-minded sometimes, especially with regards to exploring different genres," Swift says. "I had management that wanted to always put me in a gown and make me this torchbearer of the American songbook singers. Even when I was experimenting within the jazz genre with more modern sounds, there was blowback."

She assessed most of the material for ***Veronica Swift*** on the road. Much to her delight, many of her fans loved it. “In the concert setting, people really responded well,” she says. “I thought it was going to be so horrible but it was not like that. I think people just like good music. They can tell when you are being authentic or not, and that is what they’re responding to.”

“But I tell people that my exploration of non-jazz music is not subtraction; it is addition,” Swift continues. “I’m still going to sing jazz. That is who I am – it’s never going away. I just hope this album helps people embrace every aspect of who they are, and let it guide their own self-expression. It is okay to be a million things.”