LP Review: Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong - *Porgy & Bess*

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(Speakers Corner/Verve 6040. LP review by Andrew Cartmel)

There is no shortage of jazz interpretations of Gershwin’s opera *Porgy and Bess*, including entries in the canon by Oscar Peterson, Ralph Burns and Mundell Lowe. The Gil Evans and Miles Davis collaboration is perhaps the most famous, while the most unjustly obscure is the Bill Potts gem *The Jazz Soul of Porgy and Bess*. But right up there with the best of them was the 1957 double album from Verve featuring Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong.

The unsung hero of these sessions, though, is the arranger and conductor Russ Garcia. A mainstay of Verve in the 1950s, Garcia lived to be 95 and kept working until the end. Active in film scoring as well as jazz (he was swindled out of an Oscar) he was an arranger of genius and wrote the book on the subject — literally (*The Professional Arranger Composer*, still in print after over half a century).

But whether you approach *Porgy and Bess* as a fan of Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong or Russ Garcia, you are in for treat. The album has been reissued a number of times over the years, but never like this. Speakers Corner Records have gone the extra mile, creating an exact replica of the original Verve double LP set, including the handsome ten page booklet and David Stone Martin illustration. This is a lavish package and, most importantly, the sound quality of the vinyl is stunning.
The program begins with a lengthy instrumental Overture which previews the themes, and hints at the quality of the players involved (the cream of the Los Angeles and Chicago sessions scenes). The swaggering brass take on It Ain’t Necessarily So is a particular highlight here. But soon the stars take over.

Louis Armstrong makes his trumpet début on Summertime a few seconds before Ella begins to sing, and we are off to the races immediately. When Armstrong also starts to sing, on the second verse, the album moves into the stratosphere. Paul Smith’s lovely, reflective piano is particularly noteworthy amongst the accompaniment.

Louis Armstrong is at his vocal best on I’ve Got Plenty of Nothing, giving a soulful and gritty performance. Then Ella Fitzgerald comes in and it’s like sandpaper and satin. Any tendency to take Ella’s immense vocal gift for granted is nullified by the constant contrast provided by Armstrong. Each is a giant in their own way.

The foretaste of It Ain’t Necessarily So in the Overture is effortlessly eclipsed by Armstrong’s obligato and solo when the song proper arrives at the beginning of Side 3. It is raucous and sensual. Once again Paul Smith’s piano is outstanding and the horn section, including Buddy Childers on trumpet and Milt Bernhart on trombone, provide expert accompaniment. Rousing and sensual, this song provides a peak which the album would seem hard pressed to surmount. Yet it does so almost immediately.

Armstrong gives a devilish, roguish vocal performance of A Woman is a Sometime Thing which borders on the sleazy (in a good way) while also tearing up the place on trumpet. Part of Russ Garcia’s brilliance is that he never allows his soloists to be swamped by the massive orchestral forces around them, and provides space for spontaneity amongst the carefully calibrated orchestrations.

The bubbling joy of There’s a Boat That’s Leaving Soon for New York is Paul Smith’s finest moment on the album but Joe Monodragon on bass and Alvin Stoller on drums also get a chance to shine here. Indeed, it sounds like an intimate, small group piece. But the rhythm section are balanced against the orchestra, with pointed interjections from the brass section waiting just around the corner. Once again Garcia’s expertise is on display.

The diversity of musical strategies here is impressive. For instance, Oh, Doctor Jesus is the string section’s finest hour (more like a couple of minutes, actually). They conjure a shimmering, shivering backdrop for Ella’s vocal, providing both tension and release in a striking modernist arrangement which sees the rest of the orchestra sitting out — except perhaps for a single note of percussion.

Finally, Oh Lord I’m on My Way manages the interesting trick of being both laid-back and exhilarating, with rhythm section, brass and strings perfectly integrated around Armstrong’s singing. There’s even a choir thrown in for good measure. A moving climax to a superlative album.

Russ Garcia ended his days in a small town in New Zealand where people would give him odd looks when he mentioned that Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong were friends of his. He didn’t mind. He was too busy making music.

This is an unsurpassed, and probably unsurpassable, reissue of a classic album.