

THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY GUARDIAN

Every time she takes the stage, she confuses a few of her listeners.

"I've had people come up and say to me, 'How can you be a jazz singer and sing a song by U2?'" she confided. "I just tell them I love that song. I want to sing songs that move me, and they just happen to fall into a lot of different categories."

Indeed. On her 1999 debut CD, *Under the Influence*, the East Bay vocalist opens with Elvis Costello's "Watching the Detectives" and confounds categorization by including such pop-jazz classics as "My One and Only Love" and "When I Take My Sugar to Tea," along with Dr. John's "Pictures and Paintings" and Led Zeppelin's "I'm Gonna Crawl."

Mamma delivers more of the same on her new, second recording, *Meant to Be*, which she officially inaugurates with CD release shows Tuesday, September 4 at Yoshi's in Oakland. She segues from U2's "Running to Stand Still" into Steely Dan's "Dirty Work," immediately succeeded by James Taylor's "You Can Close Your Eyes" and Fats Waller's "Honeysuckle Rose." She follows Duke Ellington's familiar "In a Mellow Tone" with the obscure "Distant Water," by contemporary folk singer-songwriter David Wilcox.

But with Mamma's fresh vocal delivery weaving through uncluttered arrangements that draw equally from jazz and pop, every potentially jarring juxtaposition feels as natural as Barry Bonds sending a 3-and-1 fastball over the right-field wall.

Pop Appropriations

Mamma is actually just one of the genre-blurring vocalists venturing beyond the old chestnuts and standards, adapting material most people would never associate with jazz. In a similar way, Cassandra Wilson has recorded the Monkees' "Last Train to Clarksville" and Van Morrison's "Tupelo Honey." Patricia Barber doesn't flinch away from Paul Anka's "She's a Lady" or Sonny Bono's "The Beat Goes On." And Ann Dyer cut an entire CD of songs from the Beatles' *Revolver* album.

This is not a totally new phenomenon. Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday were famous -- and in some circles infamous -- for working their jazz alchemy on Tin Pan Alley pop novelty tunes, even when music publishers and producers sometimes decided what songs would be recorded. And, of course, such legendary jazz instrumentalists as Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane used more than a few lightweight vehicles as takeoff points for solos that minimally referenced the original material.

Still, there's something especially bracing about the way Mamma puts her personal stamp on both Sammy Cahn's "Put 'Em in a Box" and Tom Waits' "Hope That I Don't Fall in Love With You" at the end of her new CD. Although she commands the kind of inventive phrasing and ornamentation associated with jazz singing, she doesn't just riff off melodies and harmonies for musical effect. She takes every word she sings seriously, and she makes you confront a song in a totally new light. "I've had someone ask me if I wrote 'Watching the Detectives,'" she explained during one of two phone conversations earlier this week. "When I ask if they've listened to Elvis Costello, and they realize it was his, they say, 'Oh, I've never really heard the lyric before.'"

Also, the accompaniment, while peppered with sharp solos, begs the "Is it jazz?" question. Mamma says she's drawn occasional criticism from jazz purists, but she quotes Abbey Lincoln, her friend, mentor and biggest inspiration, on the subject: "When I hear people talk to her about her being a jazz singer, she corrects them and says, 'I'm a singer of music,' and that's how I feel."

Musical Youth

Perhaps it's natural for any vocalist to sing the songs of her era, give or take a generation. If Mammina didn't mix James Taylor tunes into the same set with Mack Gordon and Harry Warren's "The More I See You," she'd be less than faithful to the totality of her musical background. A native of St. Joseph, Mich., Mammina grew up in an eclectic musical environment. Her mother sang Nat "King" Cole's "Mona Lisa" and "Unforgettable" as lullabies and listened to big-band jazz and Ella Fitzgerald. Her father went to school with jazz pianist Gene Harris ("My grandmother would tell him she'd bake him some bread if he'd play the piano for us"). Her brothers and sisters all sang and brought rock records into the house. It's only natural that Mammina's tastes would run from Betty Carter and Aretha Franklin through Genesis and Yes to Joni Mitchell and Miles Davis.

After moving to the Bay Area in 1986, Mammina pursued varied musical paths. She attended Jazz Camp and studied with pianist/educator Ed Kelly at Laney College in Oakland. She sang in a huge SF concert that re-created the Grateful Dead's *Blues for Allah* album. She did studio session work with the Spinners, Narada Michael Walden and others.

In order to cut her own record, though, she had to start her own record label, Mamma Grace, enlist family members to help with mail orders and publicity, and organize and oversee her own recording sessions with the savvy assistance of veteran producer and engineer Cookie Marenco (Charlie Haden's Quartet West, the Turtle Island String Quartet, M.I.R.V.). "It was a long haul getting to that point," Mammina said, "but once we started doing it, I realized this is what I want to do more of."

The vocalist knows how to take care of business. In addition to her inseparable accompanist, guitarist Andre Bush, Mammina has recruited a host of impressive musicians to play on her records, including keyboardist Matt Rollings, bassist James Genus, reed virtuoso Paul McCandless, accordionist Rob Burger and violinist Darol Anger. She has secured a record-distribution deal in Japan, although she still seeks a US distributor. And she did one interview for this column from a cell phone while driving around to put up posters for the Yoshi's gig.

Songwriting on the Fly

But it's music that consumes her. Mammina's performance schedule has picked up considerable momentum during the past two years. She frequently travels to NY, Chicago and various points in the Midwest and Northwest. "Someone asked me the other day where I live, and I said, 'United Airlines,'" she said.

The performer is constantly on the prowl for new songs, and she enthused about the possibility of unveiling them in new guises for her growing audience. "I feel like I'm turning real hardcore jazz fans onto something that maybe they have never given a chance," said Mammina.

Acclaimed bassist Christian McBride, who has played Sly Stone and Steely Dan tunes on his jazz albums, recently left a message on Mammina's answering machine, saying, "You're one of us," later explaining that he thinks of her as one of the people pushing the music to another level in the 21st century.

Many of the vocalist's forward-looking choices are serendipitous. Take U2. "Cookie [Marenco] calls me up one day, and I tell her I'm listening to *Joshua Tree*," Mammina recalled, "and she says, 'What do you think of ...,' and at the same time, we both said, 'Running to Stand Still.' She said, 'We've got to try it.'"

One of the great revelations on *Meant to Be* is David Wilcox's "Distant Water," a particularly poetic evocation of love's lessons and illusions. "An old boyfriend about 10 years ago knew I was a big [James Taylor] fan and said, 'You have to check [Wilcox's 1991 *Home Again* album] out,'" Mammina explained. "I forgot about the record for a long time, and then one day Andre said, 'Are you hip to David Wilcox?' I took the record home to Michigan, and my mom and I ended up listening to it over and over again."

Inspired by "genius" songwriters like Wilcox, Taylor and Costello, Mammina occasionally tries her hand at composition. *Under the Influence* and *Meant to Be* each feature two Mammina originals.

Again, she called on Abbey Lincoln for affirmation. "She's been a real advocate for me to develop my songwriting," Mammina said. "She's going to have a one-woman show with all her own music next March in Lincoln Center. I talked to her about it a week or so ago, and she said, 'So, by the time *you're* 70, maybe you'll have the same kind of show at Lincoln Center.' So now that's one of my aspirations."

RADIO NOTE

Listen to Jenna Mammina in conversation on "The Hear & Now," 10 pm, Thursday, August 30, on KPFA, 94.1 FM, streaming at www.kpfa.org.

Jenna Mammina performs at 8 and 10 pm, Tuesday, September 4 at Yoshi's, 510 Embarcadero West, Oakland; (510) 238-9200; Sunday, September 23 at the Monterey Jazz Festival, Monterey Country Fairgrounds, 2000 Fairgrounds Road, Monterey; (925) 275-9255; and Friday, September 28 at the Freight & Salvage Coffeehouse, 1111 Addison St., Berkeley; (510) 548-1761. Partial proceeds from the Yoshi's and Freight & Salvage shows will be donated to help defray the medical expenses of Mammina's former teacher Ed Kelly.