

Q&A with Vocalist Alyssa Allgood: Lyrical Inspiration

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Having gained due recognition for her efforts as Best Collegiate Vocal Jazz Soloist for DownBeat's 2014 Student Music Awards, as well as winning second place in the Mid-Atlantic Jazz Festival's 2016 Jazz Voice Competition and securing a Luminarts Jazz Fellowship in her home base of Chicago, Alyssa Allgood is primed for a towering career.

Then again, Allgood's humility identifies her as an artist with horizontal rather than vertical aspirations, one whose surname is, fortuitously enough, a mission statement. Carving a niche in a field that is saturated with competitors, Allgood plies an optimistic trade, and recipients of her art are thankful.

Her bona fides were confirmed on her 2015 debut EP, *Lady Bird*, through which she demonstrated her clear admiration for Carmen McRae, Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald. Even if such comparisons were as inevitable as they were inspiring, Allgood was already stepping out of those shadows in service of her own.

Her 2016 follow-up, a tribute to Blue Note Records titled *Out Of The Blue* (JeruJazz), at last shines the well-deserved spotlight in her direction.

DownBeat recently caught up with Allgood to discuss the album and her creative process. Excerpts from the conversation are below.

How do you see *Out Of The Blue* as a personal statement in conjunction with, if not also distinct from, the EP?

It's a bigger deal, [this] being my first full-length CD. But the more comfortable I've become with [arranging and writing lyrics], the more I've tried to do something unique and fresh with old tunes while keeping their essence intact.

For the new album, you've written some new lyrics for tunes that were originally all-instrumental. Were you inspired by anyone in particular to take on this challenge?

There is, of course, a long tradition of vocalese writing, and at times I found myself listening to former champions like Lambert, Hendricks & Ross for inspiration. In other cases, though, in choosing songs to fit this Blue Note theme, I would just hear something and think to myself, "I simply *must* write lyrics for this."

Where did your confidence as a lyricist come from? Is it simply the result of performing songs with great lyrics, or do you have some background in creative writing that emboldened you to put pen to paper?

I've never done creative writing, but in school I double-majored in communications along with jazz performance. I always enjoyed the writing I had to do as a liberal arts student, and as a singer I was already aware of what went into really good lyrics.

Some of the best lyrics of the old standards, I realized, were relatable to people from all walks of life, so I tried to leave room for interpretation.

Do you draw from your own life experiences for your lyrics?

When I'm choosing songs to sing, like those from the Great American Songbook, I look for material I can relate to, which makes my job as a singer that much more honest. With my lyrics, I'm trying to bring in my own experiences, but also make them broad enough for others to understand.

Being at the beginning stage of my career, I still have uncertainties about what's next, and the fact that these songs [on the new record] reflect that theme just happened by itself. I hope people will find it refreshing for being about more than just love, but also about this journey called life.

Do you have any sort of larger philosophical approach to making music?

Many of these songs are about peace and equality, self-acceptance and acceptance of others, all of which are important values to me as a human being outside the music. So, for me, it's nothing larger than trying to connect my own beliefs about being a good person and bringing that to the music.

How do you differentiate live and studio performance?

I've come a long way since the EP and am more comfortable in the studio than I was then. Now, instead of being hypercritical of every single note, I've learned to see each project as a moment in time in my career. Performing-wise, I'm more comfortable with myself and the band, just up there trying to have fun, connect with the audience, and be myself.

Most people don't care to be shown what I've learned in music school; they just want to feel something in the performance. Both sides—education and performance—are about being there in the moment.

Anyone who hears you will surely notice the virtuosity of your scatting. Far too often, singers treat it as an adornment. You, on the other hand, become a true instrument in the ensemble. What's your approach?

I used to sing at a jazz camp run by vocalist Janice Borla, with whom I later studied at North Central College [in Naperville, Illinois]. When singing in combo at North Central, if I didn't have lyrics, I would just sing along with the horns. That's how I came to understand what I should be doing and what I could do [with my voice].

My best advice for those who want to scat sing is always to listen to instrumentalists and follow along as best you can. I was never taught that this wasn't the norm for a singer, so I grew up doing it.

How does all of this recognition for your accomplishments make you feel?

During my last year of college, people doubted what I could do with a music degree. But this recognition proved that I could reach for, and keep dreaming about, something bigger and work hard to actually get there.

Competitions have been great, too, not only for the accolades but also for the opportunity to meet other singers from around the world. Singing for Al Jarreau at Montreux was nerve-racking—and, of course, I had to go first because it was all alphabetical—but it helped me to grow. You can hear some of that in the new lyrics, learning from vulnerable experiences.

Describe yourself as an artist in one sentence.

Being at the forefront of bridging the gap between singers and instrumentalists is my lifelong goal.

-Tyran Grillo