

Claire Martin

Acclaimed as the outstanding new British voice of the decade, Claire Martin achieved instant recognition with her 1992 debut album, "The Waiting Game", which was chosen as one of the Times records of the year. The pianist and composer Richard Rodney Bennett, long renowned as a connoisseur of singers, concluded his liner notes for the album with the unabashed exclamation: "This record knocks me out." Tony Bennett was equally enthusiastic when he appeared on the same bill as Claire at the Glasgow International Jazz Festival. The British Jazz Awards named her "RISING STAR of 1994", "Best Jazz Singer of 1995", and "Best Vocalist 1997".

Following enthusiastic reviews for her appearances in the United States, Claire recorded her latest album in New York last autumn. "Make This City Ours" - her fifth CD for the Linn label - features a potent international line-up including the American "young lion" saxophonist Antonio Hart.

Born in South London, Claire has been singing professionally since leaving stage school at the age of 16. Growing up in a household where the sounds of singers such as Anita O'Day were always in the air, she also developed an interest in all areas of popular music, from rockabilly to Sting. Her records - on which songs by Harold Arlen and Irvin Berlin rub shoulders with numbers by Stevie Wonder, Phoebe Snow and Milton Nascimento - reflect her eclectic roots.

She counts Shirley Horn, Sheila Jordan, Peggy Lee and Ella Fitzgerald among her stylistic influences. Like Ronnie Scott and the first generation of British beboppers, Claire's musical apprenticeship included a spell on transatlantic cruise liners. Stopovers in New York gave her ample opportunities to raid Manhattan's record shops in search of new songs which she then studied and rehearsed on the homeward leg of the voyage.

Part of the new wave of jazz musicians to find an enthusiastic young audience in London, Claire subsequently performed at Ronnie Scott's and Pizza On The Park. After signing to the Glasgow-based Linn label, she recorded "The Waiting Game" with a quintet featuring guitarist Jim Mullen. The disc was among the best-selling jazz albums of the year.

1993 saw the release of her second album, "Devil May Care" - a blend of original tunes and material by such diverse figures as Noel Coward and sixties hipster Bob Dorough. The session was produced by Rick Taylor whom Claire had met when working with Wet Wet Wet at the Albert Hall. Mixing pop and jazz idioms, the album helped Claire to success in the "Rising Stars" category of the 1994 British Jazz Awards.

One of the tracks "On Thin Ice" - written by Claire herself - was used on the soundtrack of the British feature film, "Jack and Sarah", released in 1995. Claire also sang the signature tune to the BBC1 comedy series "If You See God, Tell Him", starring Richard Briers, and she became a regular guest artist with the award winning BBC Big Band. The orchestra now regularly performs arrangements drawn from her repertoire.

A new phase in Claire's recording career opened in 1994, when she joined forces with her new producer, Joel Siegel, manager to the cult jazz singer, Shirley Horn. Introduced to Claire by Richard Rodney Bennett, Siegel supervised proceedings on Claire's third album "Old Boyfriends", released in 1994. It was another acclaimed exercise in daring and unorthodox programming, the material ranging from the risqué

lyrics of Rupert Holmes' "Partners in Crime" to the heart-on-sleeve sentiments of "Close As Pages In A Book", a vintage ballad from the pen of Dorothy Fields and Sigmund Romberg. The title tune, written by Tom Waits, had previously been heard on the soundtrack of the Francis Ford Coppola film "One From the Heart". Warmly received by the critics, "Old Boyfriends" was another best-seller, rising to Number Two slot on the Virgin jazz charts.

In January 1995 Claire made her American debut with four sell-out shows at The Nest in Washington DC. Her performance attracted enthusiastic reviews in The Washington Post and The Village Voice. Later in the year Claire won the Best British Vocalist category at the British Jazz Awards, and in August she took her group into Ronnie Scott's to make her first live album. Given the highly appropriate title "Offbeat", the disc included winning treatments of Laura Nyro's "Buy and Sell" and Phoebe Snow's "Something Real".

America's critics - so often indifferent to new talent from beyond the shores of Manhattan - were taking note of Claire's progress by this stage. The plaudits were led by The New York Times contributor, James Gavin - author of the standard history of New York cabaret: "In an era when young jazz singers tend to sound far too much like their idols," he wrote "there's no mistaking the voice of Claire Martin, who combines a cool, burnished tone with the ear of a born musician."

In November of 1995 Claire was the only British artist to be chosen to appear on the "RISING STARS" tour of Europe which provided a showcase for some of the jazz world's outstanding contemporary artists, among them Diana Krall, Cyrus Chestnut and David Sanchez.

March of 1996 found Claire appearing as guest vocalist on "Years Apart" the new album the guitarist Martin Taylor. Claire provided the lyrics for the title track, and at the recording session in Paris she performed alongside the violinist Stephane Grappelli, the latest recruit to the growing army of musicians and critics who have been won over by her talents. "Claire Martin is a wonderful artist," he declared afterwards. "She swings and has such warmth to her voice."

After appearing on the network TV show "Good Morning America" in the spring 1997 Claire returned to New York in October to record her new album. With a title song by the Brazilian troubadour Milton Nascimento, "Make This City Ours" also included another Claire Martin original, "Empty Bed" and a wry glance at the cult of the body beautiful in Suzanne Cloud's "Collagen Lips". Along with Antonio Hart, the American contingent on the record was completed by Peter Washington on bass and Gregory Hutchinson on drums.