

MOTHERSHIP

Geri Allen lands her first album in six years.

CONNECTION

Why did it take so long for her to touch down?

It's Monday night and the house is jumping. No, we're not in some famous jazz haunt like the Village Vanguard—we're in Upper Montclair, N.J., and Geri Allen is standing at her stove, hooking it up like all loving moms do. Dinner tonight? Brussel sprouts, baked chicken and macaroni and cheese.

Allen is catering to her three energetic children—Laila, 14; Wally, 8; and Barbara, 7—and the family's good-natured but rambunctious pooch, Krypto, when suddenly Wallace Roney enters the house. After exchanging pleasantries with his wife and children, Roney heads upstairs, grabs his trumpet and blazes through a series of scales with pinpoint precision.

By John Murph





Downstairs in the kitchen, which is decorated with crayon drawings and watercolor paintings, Allen is putting the finishing touches on the meal. “Did you eat?” she asks softly. “No,” I reply. “Well, there’s plenty, so come to the table.”

Allen and Roney’s professional and personal worlds appear to integrate seamlessly, and the vibe in the home falls somewhere between *The Cosby Show’s* Huxtables and the Carmichaels in Spike Lee’s *Crooklyn*. I ask Allen what’s her secret to balancing a career and a family. “I don’t want to talk about it, because as soon as you talk about it, everything falls apart,” she laughs. “I just pray a lot.”

And she writes a lot.

Domesticity fuels many of Allen’s compositions, and that’s true on her triumphant new CD, *The Life of a Song* (Telarc)—her first record in six years, which sees her reteaming with her heavy-duty bandmates from Betty Carter’s trio: bassist Dave Holland and drummer Jack DeJohnette. The album opens with “LBW’s House (The Remix),” a

jubilant Latin-tinged tribute to her kids, and the tune projects all of their adolescent ebullience. The “remix” tag is there because the song’s a sly reworking of “Laila’s House” from her 1992 Blue Note disc, *Maroons*. “The energy and purity that children bring into a house makes you focus on what’s important,” Allen says. “Whatever else you’re doing, they have to be acknowledged at all times. They’re the priority. Those are ones who I will ultimately judge my life by.”

Allen could easily pull together all the tunes that she’s scripted for her family into one potent single disc. There’s also “Baby’s Breath (for Little Barbara),” “Gabriel’s Royal Blue Reals,” “Dark Prince” and “Soul Heir”—the first one dedicated to the youngest daughter and the following three to her husband—from *The Gathering* (Verve, 1998). Plus, “Mother Wit” (for her mother Barbara Allen), “New Eyes Opening (for her son) and “FMFMF (For My Family, For My Friends)” on *Eyes...In the Back of Your Head* (Blue Note, 1997) and “Night of Power (For My Daughter Laila)” on *The Nurturer* (Blue Note, 1990).

“I’m grateful to be here and I understand that there are legions of people before me who made it possible for me to do my work,” says Allen, now sitting on her living room sofa. “Those tributes are about gratitude.” On the new disc, “LBW’s House (The Remix)” leads into “Mounts and Mountains,” a sterling tone poem to her father and brother.

Her musical displays of appreciation extend beyond bloodlines. *The Life of a Song* features “In Appreciation” for Civil Rights heroine Rosa Parks and the gutbucket funkier “Black Bottom,” which gives props to her home city of Detroit and its once-pulsating entertainment and commerce district. “It was like the heartbeat of Detroit’s jazz scene, and probably one of the biggest all-black business communities in the country. The Paradise Theater was there, and [the district] was named Paradise Valley, but we affectionately called it Black Bottom. There was a circuit in which

musicians would go from town to town, and it would be an ongoing working environment. I wanted to pay tribute to that memory, just because that’s when the music really thrived.

“[Detroit’s] scene was very vibrant with a lot of great musicians like Marcus Belgrave, Donald Walden, Roy Brooks and the McKinnley family. There were all these places to play every weekend. It would start late at night and go into the wee hours of the morning. That’s where a lot of us learned to improvise. The older musicians would take you and put you under a baptism by fire. I wasn’t necessarily ready, but there was patience with these great musicians, who would give you a chance to grow.”

Allen says her family wasn’t too thrilled initially with her career path in music. “When you make a commitment to this lifestyle as an artist, there’s an ethereal nature to it. [My parents] had a particular vision of what I should be. They wanted me to be happy, which translated into finding a solid day job, so that I wouldn’t

have to struggle through life.”

Her career is certainly no stranger to struggle. Allen is one of the most gifted jazz artists of our time, and she released some of the most memorable jazz CDs of the '90s. She's also performed and been singled out by some of jazz's finest musicians such as Steve Coleman, Charlie Haden, Wayne Shorter, Betty Carter, Ornette Coleman and Charles Lloyd. So it's somewhat baffling to conceive that she was without a record deal for so long.

Soon after Verve released *The Gathering*, Polygram and Universal merged, and she, like many other artists, was dropped from the roster. “I really don't spend energy on that, because I'm focusing on the future,” she says when asked to discuss the period between record deals. But she praises her manager, Ora Harris, for keeping her working steadily during that time. “There was a time when an album didn't define whether you could work,” Allen says. “I remember when you could really have a working band and participate in its evolution. That was a real vital part of this music. To me, that's really key to the music continuing to flourish in the way that it really should. A lot of [record] companies are going for catalog now, in the safety of knowing that that classic music will sell forever, which is true. But it's important to have faith and to support the music of the present and future.”

It's interesting to note that for all of Allen's various personal tributes, and her profound respect and knowledge of jazz history, she's never recorded an easily marketable songbook album. There is no *Geri Allen Plays Cole Porter* in her discography. “I'm trying to be a writer,” she says. “So, I tend to put a lot of original music on my records. I've always felt that composition helps crystallize your vision and voice. That has always been a real important focal point for me. But far be it from me to criticize anybody's way of expression. If it's sincere, it comes through, whether it's through another person's composition or your own. I think the most important thing is what you communicate and at what level.”

Allen isn't totally averse to featuring standards on her discs as evidenced by her splendid renderings of Mal Waldron's “Soul Eyes,” Billy Strayhorn's “Lush Life” and Bud Powell's “Dance of the Infidels” on *The Life of a Song*. Each performance is a great testament to Allen's talents as an interpreter and arranger. She extracts all the melancholy out of “Lush Life” yet still suggests a hint of optimism with her lyrical voicings. Her “Dance of the Infidels” is downright frisky, and Allen says she wanted to make the connection between Lil Hardin Armstrong and Herbie Hancock in terms of their modernistic approaches. On “Soul Eyes” Allen shows off her romantic side, draping Waldron's lovely melody with a haunting horn arrangement from flugelhornist Marcus Belgrave, saxophonist Dwight Andrews and trombonist Clifton Anderson.



What also makes *The Life of a Song* one of this year's most rewarding discs is the joyous interplay between Allen, DeJohnette and Holland. This is her first time recording with the two since Betty Carter's 1993 live disc, *Feed the Fire* (Verve). “In context with Betty, working with Jack and Dave was overwhelming for me,” Allen says. “I wished that I could have been a better musician at that time. I'd love to do some space travel and go back there now with all the experiences and knowledge that I've accumulated. I think that I could serve the music better now. But I had that blessing and opportunity

then, and I'm very grateful for that. So, in a way, the new album gave me an opportunity to revisit that moment with Betty.”

DeJohnette recognizes Allen's musical growth in the 11-year span between *Feed the Fire* and *The Life of a Song*. “She's matured a lot in terms of improvising and interpreting,” he says. “Geri has really done her homework on all levels. Being a mother has brought another creative energy to her. On this recording, she came out much more determined, commanding, and confident. Her music makes you take notice.”

There's a trace of humility when Allen looks at her previous albums in light of her new disc. She's striving for a higher degree of personalized clarity, underscored with an emotional and intellectual immediacy, in her music. “At this point, connecting with people is the focus,” she says. “Utilizing all my musical information to communicate, like having all the words at your disposal but being as clear as possible, using them at the right moment.”

Allen also sees *The Life of a Song* as a continuation of the musical journey she traveled with her discs from the mid-'90s. She looks at her 1994 trio date *Twenty-One*, with Ron Carter and Tony Williams, and *Eyes... In the Back of Your Head*, her most adventurous outing, featuring Ornette Coleman, Cyro Baptista and Roney, as significant signposts in her musical development. “It really changed my life to sit next to all of those innovators and experience the insides of what being an innovator really means,” she says. “Each of those albums are stepping stones to me trying to crystallize my vision—being the best musician that I can be, at that moment—and learning from whatever experience of that moment. Your weaknesses change all of the time. Each of those settings was a new universe unto themselves.”

Allen says that masters such as Ornette Coleman, Betty Carter and Charles Lloyd were incredibly open with her. “The musicians I've worked with who have been the most innovative have also been the most generous. There's a generosity in which the music is placed first,” she says as the plinking of piano notes wanders in from the distance. A piano tuner dropped by earlier to tweak the instrument before band practice, and bassist Darryl Hall just came in.

No more talk. It's time for music.

The next day there's calm in the Allen-Roney home. With the kids at school, Allen has the house to herself and she apologizes for all the untimely distractions the night before. She seems more serene, more focused, and the quietness gives her room to reflect on the blessings of life—especially Wallace Roney.

"I think he really epitomizes the best of what the music has to offer on every level,"

she says. "He's probably the most prepared musician I've ever met of this generation. There's a depth to his playing that's very unusual. I'm just in awe of his abilities and what he's accomplished as a musician. Through the years, I've learned so much from him. I think it's cool to have the setup where I can go out and make music with all these great musicians, and then come home with one of the greatest musicians of our time and have a great dialogue about musical processes.

It's an ongoing workshop in a place of trust that's like a mothership of information."

She goes on to talk about her recent career breakthroughs in a voice that is excited, joyful. In addition to ending her six-year recording silence as a solo artist, Allen's recently had the chance to lend her writing and arrangements skills to other artists such as singers Andy Bey and Mary Stallings. With Bey, she cushioned his baritone voice with luxurious, orchestral horn arrangements for his last disc, *American Song* (Savoy). With Stallings, Allen functions as an arranger, instrumentalist, composer and producer. She and Stallings are now putting the final touches on a yet-to-be-titled disc for Half Note.

"She took me on a ride," Stallings says. "She brought new life into some old material that's just breathtaking. Geri was so refreshing to work with, because she's very spontaneous. She's really a genius, without question." Bey shares Stallings' sentiments about Allen's writing and arranging. He's been a fan of her music ever since hearing selections from her 1987 LP, *Open on All Sides in the Middle* (Minor). "I remember liking the concept, because it was so different. That was actually before I heard her play in person. Besides being a great piano player, she's a great songwriter and orchestrator. She has it all covered as far as I'm concerned."

Allen helped score the HBO movie *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks*, a documentary on actress Beah Richards, with Bernice Johnson Reagon and Toshi Reagon. Director Lisa Gay Hamilton was so enthused about Allen's "The Gathering" that she initially wanted to use it for the film's opening sequence. Instead, Hamilton uses the celebratory "In Appreciation" from *The Life of a Song* in an empowering scene sequence involving a black, female freedom fighter defiantly dancing amid a maelstrom of attack dogs and water hoses. Allen dedicates the song to Rosa Parks, but she also cites Dr. Billy Taylor's "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free" as a significant inspiration. "My generation is still very connected to the Civil Rights struggle, and we understand that the struggle continues," Allen says. "We can't forget those people who came before us and made it possible for us to maneuver in this world in a whole other way that wasn't possible about 50 years ago. Some of these people we know very well, and some are nameless."

1/2 Vertical Island

Allen has another new project that is making her glow: Time Line, which features bassist Darryl Hall, drummer Mark Johnson and the saxophonists David McMurray and her brother-in-law Antoine Roney. With Time Line, she incorporates vintage electric keyboards such as the Fender Rhodes and synths, which are complemented by McMurray's doubling up on various electronic devices. "The idea behind Time Line is to connect the continuity from Africa to the present, through all the ways in which the music morphed," Allen says. "Wherever black people were dispersed—the Caribbean, South America, Cuba, Brazil, the U.S.—we access that music, using electronica as a tinge," explains Allen. For this band, she also wants to employ a tap dancer, something that she did 15 years ago with hooper Lloyd Storey on *Open on All Sides in the Middle*. Last June at Carnegie Hall she witnessed Savion Glover's mesmerizing performance at the JVC Festival with Wayne Shorter's quartet, Herbie Hancock and a full orchestra. "Savion just displayed this awe," Allen enthuses. "His virtuosity was reminiscent of Tony Williams, and the way he was responding to Wayne. It was one of those moments in which I'm so grateful to have witnessed. It just validated my idea."

Another band that Allen has in the works is the Mary Lou Williams Project, which features Billy Hart and Buster Williams. Earlier this year the three performed Williams' *Zodiac Suite* at Jazz at the Lincoln Center, and the trio performed excerpts from the same suite at the Kennedy Center for the Mary Lou Williams Women in Jazz Festival. Next year Allen hopes to release a series of discs featuring compositions exclusively by Williams.

As the afternoon progresses, the calm gives way to the family's energy. Roney comes home and Laila, Wally and Barbara soon follow him. All three kids offer warm yet unassuming hellos to their mom before plopping down to watch television.

I wondered aloud if the kids recognize the eminence of Geri Allen and Wallace Roney as world-renowned jazz figures or do they just see them as their parents? "They see us as Mom and Dad," Allen says, proudly. "They're very aware of the significance of Charlie Parker, John Coltrane and Miles Davis, though. We take them with us to performances. The children are around the music, and they experi-

ence it as an organic part of growing up."

Allen says she's teaching Barbara piano lessons, per her daughter's request, while Wally is seriously investigating the drums and he also plays trumpet. As for Laila, her musical interests are translating into tap dancing. "It's exciting to see our kids gravitate towards music on their own," Allen says. "They're not being coerced into it. Perhaps they see that music gives Wallace and me lot of satisfaction." **JT**

Listening Pleasures

Herbie Hancock, *Gershwin's World* (Verve)

Miles Davis, *Filles de Kilimanjaro* (Columbia)

Gearbox

Fazioli pianos

1/2 Vertical Island