

Helen Merrill & Stan Getz - Just Friends (1989)

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1. *Cavatina*
2. *It Never Entered My Mind*
3. *Just Friends*
4. *It Don't Mean A Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)*
5. *Baby Ain't I Good To You*
6. *It's Not Easy Being Green*
7. *If You Go Away*
8. *Yesterdays*
9. *Music Maker*

Personnel:

Helen Merrill (vocals),
Stan Getz (tenor saxophone),
Joachim Kuhn (piano),
Torrie Zito (piano),
Jean-Francois Jenny Clark (bass),
Daniel Humair (drums).

Recognized as one of the country's great jazz singers, Helen Merrill is also one of the least known, except to aficionados. In this remarkable album from 1989, Merrill, then almost sixty years old, teams up with Stan Getz to record a stunning exhibition of improvisational jazz. Her mature voice is rich and powerful, but she retains a sweetness that allows her to be whispery, melancholy, pensive, or sexy without sounding "thin" or fragile. The timbre of Getz's sax blends perfectly with her alto to create a double-barreled melodic line, and their individual talents at improvisation lead to interpretations of immense creativity. The album is Merrill's, however, with Getz supporting but not overpowering her, remembering always that he is the talented guest on the album.

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The songs encompass many moods. "Cavatina," written by Cleo Laine, is soft, slow, and wonderfully romantic, and Getz's variations build on the romance. "It Never Entered My Mind" shows Merrill's control, as she almost whispers the lyrics, creating a pensive, moody ballad with fresh sounds and interpretations. By contrast, "Just Friends" is upbeat and quick, and "It Don't Mean a Thing," an Ellington song, is wild and swingy, with a terrific piano solo (Joachim Kuhn) to continue the melodic variations introduced by Getz. "Baby, Ain't I Good to You" gets the slow, sexy treatment, while Jacques Brel's "If You Go Away," so often a song of agony and passion, is introduced by Getz's solo sax and becomes quiet and melancholy here, moodier and less threatening than most other interpretations.

The climax is "Yesterdays," a song so filled with improvisation that it is sometimes difficult to recognize the original melody. Merrill stays in the background here as Getz and bassist Jean-Francois Jenny-Clark go to town creating a fresh sound for this standard. Impeccable in its musical presentation and very dramatic in its originality, this album sets the standard for collaboration between two jazz stars who obviously respect each other and their medium--and it may be Merrill's best album.--- Mary Whipple (New England)

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