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Pages: For Love and Justice, in the American Grain: the album Voice of My Beautiful Country by singer Rene Marie



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patriotic songs—"America the Beautiful," "My Country 'Tis of Thee," and "The Star-Spangled Banner"—is shrewdly ambitious, admirably epic. Rene Marie's album, *Voice of My Beautiful Country*, is, as intended, a major work.

By Daniel Garrett

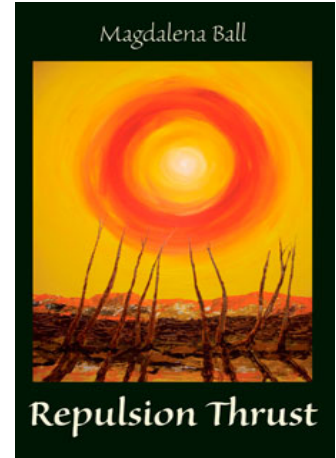
Rene Marie, *Voice of My Beautiful Country*

Produced by Rene Marie and Quentin Baxter

Motema Music, 2011

One strains to find in ordinary popular music, such as dance and rock and rhythm-and-blues, what is common in jazz: complexity, delicacy, maturity, and sophistication. I am reminded of that yet again when listening to the singer Rene Marie who can move from a hush to emphatic declaration in ways that make sense in terms of emotion and sound. Rene Marie, with versatile mastery, creates compelling and convincing moods. Where does a singer learn to sing like this? It seems a

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miracle. On Rene Marie's album *Voice of My Beautiful Country*, on which she performs a varied program, her interpretation of "Just My Imagination," made popular by the Motown Records group The Temptations, a beautiful, wistful song, a perfect song, has many colors, many tones, and she seems to improve on perfection. Yet, her performance of Grace Slick's "White Rabbit (Go Ask Alice)" reminds the listener of how exceptional rock music can be (identified with the raucous and raw, it can be classical in its drama and symbolism). Clearly, musical quality is more important than musical genre: the real difference is between good music and bad. When Rene Marie takes on a song about dark angels, "Angelitos Negros," which first came to my attention when performed by the great Roberta Flack on Flack's album *First Take*, a collection that demonstrated Roberta Flack's great taste and complex talent and was a beacon for decades of sensitive work, I am torn regarding deciding my preference for Rene Marie or Roberta Flack's differing interpretive choices. Flack's interpretation has great power within restraint; and Rene Marie pursues great animation, believable impersonation. Rene Marie's selection of patriotic songs—"America the Beautiful," "My Country 'Tis of Thee," and "The Star-Spangled Banner"—is shrewdly ambitious, admirably epic. Rene Marie's album, *Voice of My Beautiful Country*, is, as intended, a major work.

With singers such as Patti Austin, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Randy Crawford, Rachelle Ferrell, Nnenna Freelon, Dianne Reeves, Esperanza Spalding, Paula West, Cassandra Wilson, Lizz Wright, and Rene Marie the tradition of music that is composed, improvised, syncopated, and swinging, the tradition

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of great African-American music, is in equally great hands. It is music of tremendous appetite and stamina, music that is fecund—and, finally, music that moves beyond category: and Rene Marie's *Voice of My Beautiful Country* is an exemplar of that. Rene Marie explores the songs on *Voice of My Beautiful Country* with pianist Kevin Bales, bassist Rodney Jordan, and drummer Quentin Baxter, with most of the music recorded in South Carolina; and together theirs, from beginning to end, is a music of courage and creativity, of freedom. In the Brubeck song "Strange Meadow Lark," which begins quietly, softly, before the intensity, rhythm, and tempo increase, a consideration of a bird, singing, flying, is an object of timeless speculation, and imagining the bird searching for a companion is inevitably human. With one song, the old and grand traditional song "O Shenandoah," the album's second song, given a passionate and reverent interpretation, Rene Marie annihilates any doubt about her talent. Yet, the singer's voice and the piano invest the song with something ambiguous and alive: human perspective and desire and the future's uncertainty.

Imagination is, often, the origin of freedom, knowledge, and love; and the Van Heusen-Burke song "Imagination" is a sweet, tender meditation, followed by Strong and Whitfield's "Just My Imagination," previously performed by a great Motown group. The performance of "White Rabbit" is evidence that jazz music is not a country or even a continent, but a whole world; and that nothing good is alien there. The drummer seems to capture both time and suspense in the melancholy "Drift Away," once made famous by Dobie Gray, but it is Rene Marie's voice, which draws from a panoply of styles

without sounding imitative, that strikes the listener's heart and impresses the mind. She has command of emotion, and the dynamics needed to express it, as well as lung power; and in "John Henry," she suggests that there is a natural connection between folk music and funk music. It is a connection that few people would suggest before now. The song praising beautiful black angels, "Angelitos Negros," is followed by "America the Beautiful," "Drum Battle," "Piano Blues," "My Country 'Tis of Thee," "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," "The Star-Spangled Banner," and a reprise of "America the Beautiful." I think that I hear jazz, Spanish, and Native American elements in "America the Beautiful," which begins in a ballad style with a martial rhythm. The melisma singing and bluesy piano in "My Country 'Tis of Thee" take the song to church, but "Lift Ev'ry Voice" is more formal, lighter-voiced, and wistful than anticipated, and the "Star-Spangled Banner" is more direct and contemporary in tone. It is wonderful to hear songs anew.

Daniel Garrett, born in Louisiana and a longtime resident of New York, a graduate of the New School for Social Research, was an intern at *Africa Report*, poetry editor for the male feminist magazine *Changing Men*, founded and acted as principal organizer of the Cultural Politics Discussion Group at ABC No Rio and Poets House, wrote about painter Henry Tanner, Edward Bannister, and Reginald Madison for *Art & Antiques*, organized the first interdepartmental environmental justice meeting at Audubon, wrote about fiction and poetry for *World Literature Today* and international film for *Offscreen*, and has done music reviews that constitute a

history of popular music for *The Compulsive Reader*. Daniel Garrett's work has appeared in *The African*, *All About Jazz*, *American Book Review*, *Black Film Review*, *Cinetext*, *Contact II*, *Film International*, *The Humanist*, *Hyphen*, *Illuminations*, *Muse Apprentice Guild*, *Option*, *Pop Matters*, *Quarterly Black Review of Books*, *Rain Taxi*, *Red River Review*, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, and *Wax Poetics*. Daniel has said, "I have been exploring American and international culture, for how they dignify, enliven, and illuminate human existence—something that sounds grand but can feel like a desperate need. Inevitably, I am involved in the struggle of hope against despair and rage, and prefer history to forgetting, and appreciation to repudiation. I wonder, What is the national musical culture now? What are its forms, limits, pleasures, and values? Which songs allow us to imagine ourselves and our world transformed?"

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