



LAINIE COOKE

Biography

Lainie Cooke made her first record—a Yiddish song performed a cappella on her cousin Oscar’s home recorder as a present for her family—when she was 3. Her next recording—a 12-tune jazz CD titled *Here’s to Life!*—was recorded when she was 60! And now, at age 73, Cooke is releasing her third CD, *The Music Is the Magic*, a masterpiece of jazz vocal art produced by drummer and trumpeter Ralph Peterson and issued on his Onyx Productions label.

Cooke never stopped singing during that 57-year gap, however. She made her radio debut at 6 in her native Minneapolis, first appeared on television at 11, and sang with local dance bands during her high school days. After studying theater for two years at the University of Minnesota, she moved to New York City when she was 20 and soon began a hugely successful career as voice-over artist for commercials, documentaries and motion pictures that kept her busy for four decades. Still, she periodically found time to showcase her considerable gifts as a jazz singer at venues in New York, Los Angeles, and even Montego Bay.

Harvey Siders, in a *Los Angeles Daily News* review of one of her Southern California engagements, wrote, “Lainie can cook on the kind of standards she prefers—the Porter-Gershwin-Rodgers & Hart classics that challenge her dramatic bent for story-telling. She has an unerring ear for melodic invention and an instinctive feel for time that allows her to take unusual rhythmic liberties. And her intonation is ‘right on.’”

Cooke also has a keen ear for choosing great songs. *The Music Is the Magic* is made of 13 of them—from the frequently performed “Lazy Afternoon,” “When I Look in Your Eyes,” “Fascinating Rhythm,” “Manana,” “Out of This World,” and “Them There Eyes” to such the lesser known gems as Ronnell Bright’s “Sweet Pumpkin,” Artie Butler and Norman Martin’s “Loving You,” Thelonious Monk’s “How I Wish” (with lyrics by Jon Hendricks), Francis Lai and Norman Gimbel’s “Live for Life,” Dave Frishberg’s “Our Love Rolls On,” Roger Kellaway and Alan and Marilyn Bergman’s “I Have the Feeling I’ve Been There Before,” and the Abbey Lincoln-penned title track.

She is empathetically supported on the disc by **Ralph Peterson** on both drums and trumpet, pianist **Tedd Firth**, soprano and tenor saxophonist **Myron Walden**, and bassist **Luques Curtis**, with **Tabari Lake** substituting for Curtis on “Mañana.” Peterson and Firth took turns writing the arrangements.

“The tune selection,” Cooke says, “was either music that we had been doing or songs that speak to me for some reason. If the music is beautiful, wonderful, soars, and has feeling, I’m attracted to it. All of these songs had some kind of story that I could wrap myself around.”

Cooke became acquainted with the songs through a variety of sources. She fell in love with the heart-warming “**Sweet Pumpkin**” after hearing Gloria Lynne’s 1961 recording. “**Live for Life**” (from the 1966 French motion picture *A Man and a Woman*) and “**The Music Is the Magic**” both stem from Abbey Lincoln recordings, although the latter tune is given a new second-line twist courtesy of Peterson’s arrangement. Jazz singer Mike Campbell turned Cooke on to “Loving You,” and she subsequently heard Shirley Horn’s recording. Cooke initially became familiar with “**When I Look in Your Eyes**” (from *Doctor Doolittle*) from the sheet music before hearing what she considers to be Irene Kral’s definitive version. “**How I Wish**” and “**I Have This Feeling I’ve Been There Before**” (“the most beautiful song in the world,” according to Cooke) were both inspired by recordings by Carmen McRae, one of her very favorite vocalists.

“**Mañana**,” of course, was a major hit in 1948 for Peggy Lee, who co-wrote it with then-husband Dave Barbour. Cooke’s calypso treatment has long been a staple of her in-person repertoire. “That is one of my favorite songs to sing with an audience,” she says. “By the end of it, they’re all singing it. It becomes a joyful experience. I love when the audience gets involved and they’re all there with you without self-consciousness.”

Cooke first met **Ralph Peterson**, long one of the most in-demand drummers in jazz (as well as a gifted trumpet player and a professor at the Berklee College of Music), about 25 years ago, but they didn’t begin making music together until relatively recently. “Ralph has the ability to lift you to a place musically and rhythmically that you didn’t know you knew how to do,” she says. “He’s always demonstrating something that makes you want to do better.”

She feels fortunate to have been singing over the dozen years with **Tedd Firth**, a remarkably versatile pianist whose résumé also includes work with Marilyn Maye, Brian Stokes Mitchell, Tom Wopat, John Pizzarelli, Carol Sloane, and many others. “Tedd knows how to listen,” Cooke comments. “He works with many singers but knows how to give each what they really need without duplicating what he did for somebody else.”

Saxophonist **Myron Walden**’s extensive discography includes recordings with Ray Barretto, Brian Blade, Tom Harrell, Freddie Hubbard, and Lizz Wright, as well as a number of his own albums. Bassist **Luques Curtis**’s credits include work with Peterson, Gary Burton, Stefon Harris, Donald Harrison, Brian Lynch, Eddie Palmieri, and Sean Jones. Young bassist **Tabari Lake** grew up listening to calypso music in the Virgin Islands, making him an ideal choice to play on “Mañana.”

Lainie Cooke broke into show business at age 6 by entering a Minneapolis radio talent contest for young people and won with her rendition of the then-popular tune “Cruising Down the River.” At 11, she began appearing two or three times a week as a hostess on a local television game show. Then, at age 12, she won a talent contest and was awarded a trip to New York City.

She vividly remembers standing with her parents at the corner of 46th Street and 7th Avenue in Manhattan and looking up at two billboards. The one, for Camel cigarettes, had puffs of smoke coming out of a camel’s mouth. The other, for Chock Full o’ Nuts, showed coffee pouring into a cup.

“I literally heard a voice in my ear say, ‘Well, you’re home now,’” she recalls. “From that moment on, all I wanted to do was be there.”

Cooke has been a resident of New York City since she was 20, save for relatively brief periods in Jamaica and California. “I went to New York to find out what I could actually do with all of the stuff that was inside me,” she reflects. “I wasn’t sure what I wanted to be—a musical theater performer or a nightclub singer.”

After working an office job for a period, she got fingerprinted for a cabaret card and played a few New York clubs, but upon doing her first out-of-town gig in Hartford, Connecticut, she developed an instant distaste for being on the road. Voice-over work, which allowed her to stay home in New York City, became her calling and kept her steadily employed for most of the next 40 years.

“I had a day job where I used my voice every day,” says Cooke, who wound up serving on the board of directors of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), eventually as the union’s National Recording Secretary. In 1973, Cooke began a three-and-a-half year adventure she calls “the very best and very worst times of my life” by joining her then-husband in running a 38-acre chicken farm in Jamaica that sold poultry and vegetables to hotels in nearby Montego Bay. She got to sing jazz once a month at a hotel there, but political turmoil on the island eventually caused the tourist industry to dry up, thus ending the couple’s business.

After getting a divorce, Cooke moved to Los Angeles in 1979 and began singing in clubs with such top jazz men as pianist Dick Shreve and bassist Bob Maize but moved back to New York in 1983 and resumed doing voice-overs. She returned briefly to L.A. to record half of her first CD, 2002’s *Here’s to Life!* on the Harlemwood label, with Shreve, Maize, and others. New York musicians, including Firth, bassist Cameron Brown, and drummer Matt Wilson, completed the album. Her second CD, 2008’s *It’s Always You*, also on Harlemwood, also featured Firth, Brown, and Wilson, as well as saxophonist Joel Frahm.

Lainie Cooke may have gotten off to a late start as a recording artist, but she has more than made up for lost time. With *The Music Is the Magic*, she again surrounds herself with some of the jazz world’s finest instrumentalists and further affirms her standing in the front ranks of jazz singers performing today. She’s got it all down—taste, technique, tone, and timing, a truly magical combination. •