



## artist bio

### JACKIE ALLEN

Crossing over for a singer whose foundation resounds jazz was a relatively rare phenomenon back in 1994 when Jackie Allen recorded her debut album, *Never Let Me Go*. However, that didn't dissuade her from finding common ground between the jazz and pop music worlds. Twelve years later, with **Tangled**, her remarkable Blue Note Records debut—and eighth CD overall—Allen continues to explore soundscapes that pay homage to both standby and contemporary standards while crafting originals that richly complement the covers. With Blue Note, Allen joins a stable of pioneering female vocalists—Cassandra Wilson, Norah Jones, Patricia Barber, Dianne Reeves—who appeal to both adult-oriented music camps.

“My tastes in music now are not that much different than when I began to record,” says Allen, who lives in Indiana and has a strong base in Chicago, “although I wasn't quite as adventurous then as I am now.”

Writing in *JazzTimes* of her two earlier albums (2003's The Men in My Life and 2004's Love Is Blue, both on the now-defunct A440 label and that have been purchased by Blue Note), Christopher Loudon remarked, “As hybrids go, Allen is a rare breed. Her firm roots are clearly folk-rock...but they are wedded to a keen jazz sensibility.” His assessment of Love Is Blue, which ranges from a tune associated with Frank Sinatra to a number by Annie Lennox? “Dazzling.”

Allen brings that same expressive power, heartfelt sparkle and stirring allure to Tangled, a 12-tune collection that ups the ante in her pursuit of singing soul into song. “I'm not too far afield from my earlier albums, but I am evolving and moving forward,” she says. “My music goes into many different directions, from the jazzy to the more refined that looks at the darker side of love.” As for the theme of the new disc, the title is apropos, she says: “I like singing about the complexities of relationships, the entanglements. That's the glue that holds the collection together, the umbrella that spreads over all the songs.”

Produced by Chicago-based bandleader/bassist/composer Eric Hochberg (who also produced The Men in My Life), Tangled features Allen's core band of keyboardists Laurence Hobgood and Ben Lewis, guitarist John Moulder (whose multi-voiced six-string lines highlight the arrangements) bassist Hans Sturm (Allen's husband) and drummer, Dane Richeson. The group brings two originals to the mix (the impassioned, rock-edged “Coal Grey Eyes” by Moulder/Sturm and the heartrending “Hot Stone Soup” by Sturm), while Allen offers three songs (collaborations with poet/writer Oryna Schiffman): the title track, “If I Had” and “Slip.”

Old-school standards include two Rodgers and Hart numbers (“You're Nearer” and “Everything I Got Belongs to You”), Johnny Mandel's “Solitary Moon” and Michael Dees' “You'll Never Learn.” They are balanced by such pop-originated fare as Van Morrison's “When Will I Ever Learn,” Donald Fagen's “Do Wrong Shoes” and Randy Newman's “Living Without You.”

Song choice, Allen explains, was a collaborative undertaking among her, her band mates and Blue Note, with arrangements largely developed by her and the group.

Tangled opens with the moving Morrison number given a gospel touch with a choir-like vocal arrangement. "This song has more depth harmonically than some of Van's other songs we looked at," says Allen. "Originally we recorded it with just the band, but when the production budget was bumped up, we went back in to the studio and came up the vocal arrangement on the spot." The album closes with a contemplative take on Newman's tune, given a beautiful balladic read by Allen. She says, "It turned out different than we thought. The way it's arranged has a country feel."

As for the Fagen tune, given a jaunty treatment with sassy horns, Allen explains that it's never been recorded. "We heard a cassette of Donald playing this just on the piano, and we decided to put a swing to it. He's heard our version, and he likes it." Fagen adds, "Jackie Allen ranks very high among all other present day singers. She gets the harmonies of the songs as completely as she trusts her way with time. Her phrasing is assured, suggesting a unique kind of tenderness. The emotional impact she conveys is extraordinary."

The Rodgers and Hart tunes come from two distinctly different inclinations. The gorgeously rendered "You're Nearer," arranged by Hobgood, was learned by Allen from an early Tony Bennett album, while the upbeat, black-humored "Everything I Got Belongs to You" is a spunky, funky outing that former Blue Note singer Holly Cole once covered. Mandel's "Solitary Moon," with the tender calm gently buoyed by Hobgood's solo and Allen's dreamy wordless vocals, was once recorded by Shirley Horn ("I'm such a big fan of hers," says Allen).

As for "You'll Never Learn," arguably the most sumptuous tune of the 12-pack, Allen recalls hearing it as a swaggering swing version like Sinatra late in his career. "When I brought this to the session, everyone joked with me, 'Are you out of your mind?'" she says. "But I knew there was something to this song. So I changed the phrasing, creating a darker Latin mood and we did this at the end of the sessions. Blue Note loved it."

The three noteworthy tunes Allen contributes were written with Schiffman while their respective sons, two days apart in age, played. "Oryna gave me a stack of her ideas for lyrics and told me to turn them upside down if I wanted," says Allen. "From my jazz background, I can improvise melodies, so then we worked on putting her words and my music together." They came up with "If I Had" that grooves with a Brazilian music vibe, the gripping blues "Tangled" ("It's about laughing in the face of adversity," says Allen) and the uptempo sexy/feisty "Slip."

Diverse in its musical scope, Tangled is jazz-infused, pop-charged and, to Allen's way of thinking, in harmony with her musical life. She came up listening to the rock music of her siblings (everything from the Beatles to Emerson, Lake and Palmer), became attuned to the pop of Elton John and Billy Joel and grew up hearing jazz from her Dixieland music playing father. "Allen performed with keyboard great Mel Rhyne and studied in college with renowned jazz bassist Richard Davis, from whom she learned the standards as well as found wings via improvisation. (She's committed to passing on what she's learned as a teacher in her own right, currently educating up-and-comers at Chicago's Roosevelt University, with previous classroom gigs at the Wisconsin Conservatory in Milwaukee; Elmhurst College, outside of Chicago; and the Old Town School in Chicago.)

"The elements of jazz and pop have always been mixed in my life," says Allen. "They all swing around in my head." In 1994, when Allen began her recording journey, that jazz-cum-pop outlook may have seemed cloudy. Today the climate is different. Tangled shines.