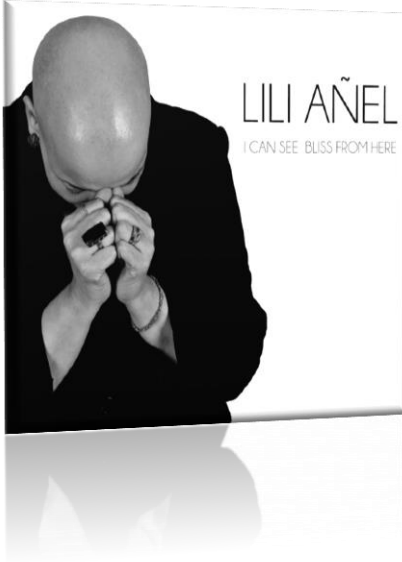


Lili Añel climbs the wall between blues and jazz, tragedy and bliss

Carol Banks Weber – Jazz Music Examiner



Lili Añel "I Can See Bliss From Here" [September 17, 2013, Wall-I Records]

Rating: ★★★★★

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"It can all be gone forever. The blink of an eye. Lose your job. Lose your car. Lose your house. Lose your mind. Lose your time. What's left to help us? Heaven help us, please. —'Climb The Wall' by Lili Añel"

It's very rare when an artist can immediately convey who they are in the first few stanzas of a song they've written and performed—without cheap theatrics, emotional blackmail, or panhandling for sainthood. New York-born, Philly resident Lili Añel is such an artist.

In the first single off her September 17, 2013, Wall-I Records release, "I Can See Bliss From Here," Añel lays herself bare, laying it all out there. "Climb The Wall" tells her story of falling to the bottom and slowly telling herself she can get out, "It's the prayer your hope gets through." The recession hit her hard, too. As a musician and songwriter, she put her hits into lyrics and music: "It can all be gone forever/in the blink of an eye/lose your job/lose your car/lose your house/lose your mind."

"That's pretty much how it happened for me," she said. "I didn't lose my mind, but I came close."

And that's just in the first song!

By the time she breezes through the second, the deceptively light, Bata style dance, "Something To Do," she's already laid out her soul in matter-of-fact, plain-spoken sound bytes. Full of sound and no fury — losing a mother too young, raised in a Harlem barrio, facing homelessness, surviving bankruptcy, and losing her hair from an auto-immune disease called Alopecia Areata — Añel sneaks in so much hope and joy through so much pain and heartache in a world of "madness and sorrow," with her hybrid voice and hybrid ear for the musicality of every composition she penned and helped shape.

Whoa.

After enjoying critical and popular success with the 2009, award-winning album, "Every Second In Between" — her fifth in an industrious career, the dominos of Añel's life began to fall. "Except for when I was on a label and was on tour in the mid-'90s," Añel continued, "I've always had a day-job while I worked on my music and burned the candle at both ends." In 2008, she faced the sudden end of her day job when the firm closed down, and joined the growing line of the unemployed. "Unemployment eventually ran out and I could not find work in my field or any field for that matter," she described. "I gave back my car, filed for bankruptcy, moved to a cheaper apartment, and sold a high-end guitar I loved and worked hard to afford. It's just material and besides you can only play one guitar at a time. That's what I told myself

to not feel badly. I'm lucky to have food, a roof over my head and a comfortable bed, and besides, I'm not alone. There are people going through much, much worse."

Lili Añel throws a lot of heartbreaking personal details into the swinging, jazz-and-blues-influenced material, heavy on the Afro-Cuban, Latin, and soul-funk. She goes from growing up in the Barrio, learning to survive everyday struggles and the death of her hard-working mom at age 52, to losing most of her hair in the middle of a career shift.

Her lyrics describing the Alopecia Areata diagnosis, 18 years ago, is startlingly abrupt and understated: "I shaved my head bald today. You see, most of my hair had fallen out anyway. And when people laugh at me, I just smile, 'cause I believe they're just scared it could be them instead of me." She's the same way casually talking about the subject, "Alopecia won't kill me or make me feel sick. I just lost most of my hair."

She makes the hard truths in this song flow out simply, making them easier to take in the spacious, serene embrace of the pleasant movement in her music, which represents her underlying, true nature. So her lyrics, often hard to accept, are eased over a gloriously intangible, horn-jacked, percussive-laced, Latin big band finish. Her music takes the hard knocks in stride.

"I am a singer/songwriter originally from New York now living in Philadelphia for the past nine years. I have five CDs to my credit and [released] my sixth, 'I Can See Bliss From Here,' this coming September 2013," she told me recently. "My music is very much a hybrid, like I am. I am a Black-Cuban American born in New York City. While many describe me as jazz, which I hold with high honor, I think my music crosses lines. It is definitely jazz-influenced, and extremely rhythmic as I've grown up listening to jazz, Afro-Cuban, Latin, soul, funk along with many other styles of music."

"I didn't give radio or the business of music any thought. I recorded the songs I wanted to put out, the way I wanted to put them out. I believe there is much in these songs for people to connect with."

Her musical influences are all over this album. She co-produced it with keyboardist and friend Dale Melton, sung and played acoustic guitar and Gretsch electric guitar, and recorded with a substantial band crossing several jazz influences themselves. In addition to the traditional instrumentalists, there's some flavor with Yasuyo Kimura on congas, bongos, and guiro, Victor Rendon playing timbales, and a mix of different varieties of keys (Melton uses grand piano, Hammond organ, a Wurlitzer, and even a Telecaster to color the aspects of Añel's truths). These musicians come from Philly and New York. They do her personal musical journey justice, taking great care of her every step of the way.

Whether she meant to or not, every song she touched on this album will touch you, deeply. The songs will get under your skin and breathe through your own eyes, amidst your own life experiences and loved ones loved and lost.

"The Best Part Of Me (Song For Joey)," taken as a lullaby, will make you cry and hug your little ones a little closer. Añel's touch on that acoustic guitar is as tender and loving as it would be cuddling her son, and will remind you of island tradewinds. Her humble hopes and dreams for that child? Forget it. "Before I even knew who you were, how you'd look, I knew you would be all that I dreamed, and when my time has come to pass, you'll be my first, you'll be my last... On the day that you were born, my heart melted, melted. Remember your first steps, your first words, can't forget how we'd dance and sing, to Jungle Book swing. No one can make me laugh like you. No one can sink my heart with worry like you do... Baby of mine, I hope you shine brighter than the stars, steady as a moon beaming. Yeah and rise taller than the trees headed towards the skies, aiming for tomorrow. I hope you fly high above the seas, soaring through the clouds, spread your wing as wide and sing, sing loud as you can sing, for all the world to know you." Not a dry eye in the house.

"Go Home" is that western soundtrack you wished someone in Hollywood would write, featuring the unseen cowboys quietly settling the land in the shadow of the Great White Hope. Heavy on the metallic beats, recalling black spirituals,

the song about a thankless job and a lousy boss rides loosely over themes of servitude in America, both slavery and Wild West's unspoken xenophobia.

Añel's distinctive vocals catch every note and every emotion out of place. Her music gives jazz and blues their due, imbuing a deep credibility, and a deeply personal sense of self in a strange, borrowed world, while calling to mind in equal measure, kindred spirits in Phoebe Snow, Joni Mitchell, Sting, Tracy Chapman, Janis Ian, and Steely Dan.

"Blindsided" (two versions in one) is one of those amalgams of musical influences that just pour out effortlessly, from Añel's melody-controlled Gretsch guitar to her Phoebe Snow meditations. As Tom Hampton on Resonator pulls in heavy doses of 1970s psychedelic rock in liberal doses, Añel draws from the wellspring of slow thirst in a tantric lovesick spiral with her refrain, "I still love you."

She pairs startlingly frank lyrics with smooth, easy listening again in, "Losing My Faith." The music almost seems like another song altogether, maybe about soaring eagles enjoying nature's respite. Not about a woman who worked her ass off only to get the shaft at a job. And she sings these parts in as unobtrusively gentle and airy a manner as an angel, letting listeners take their own individual stand. "Got laid off the other day, worked my ass off, it didn't pay. It didn't matter that I did my best, not like the rest 'cause I was the best," smoothed over with a brush of heavenly background vocals, a grand piano and guitar. It's hard to beat a songwriter who can write about the drudgery of checks, big deals, "sign on the line," contracts, and losing her faith as if she's writing about a grand romance.

"Got Me Thinking" features an amazing piano thread, so romantic and alluring, and killer lyrics applied just so, withholding enough to entice: "Take your Judas kiss and go." She uses her vocals almost intermezzo with the instrumental breaks, inflecting certain syllables of important words to say it all, "Without you," stretched almost to the breaking point — a prosaic study in Janis Ian/Joni Mitchell interaction.

Lili Añel took a special hands-on approach to this record with the sole purpose of sharing the most crucial aspects of her life, and who she really is at the core—without pussyfooting around with labored, polite introductions, or big box office studio considerations. "I didn't give radio or the business of music any thought. I recorded the songs I wanted to put out, the way I wanted to put them out. I believe there is much in these songs for people to connect with," she explained. As for the future? "I have no crystal ball. All I can do is be who I am, a singer/songwriter who loves performing and creating. I look forward to being out in the world with my music for everyone to hear. It's what I want most. And I do believe it's my time."

It's more than her time.