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Claire Daly Biography

Claire Daly was 12 years old and had been playing the saxophone (a rented Conn alto) for five months when her father took her to a concert at the Westchester County Center, just north of New York City. It was not the sort of concert the average pre-teenager was likely to attend in 1971: nostalgia was the theme, and the lineup included Vaughn Monroe and the Tommy Dorsey ghost band.

Nonetheless, young Claire was enraptured - especially by Buddy Rich's big band, which ignored nostalgia and played burning jazz versions of tunes like "Norwegian Wood" that had her "standing on my seat, screaming." After the concert, Claire saw Rich's musicians boarding the band bus, and she has never forgotten the thought that entered her head at that moment: "I would do anything to be on that bus."

Nine years later, fresh out of the Berklee College of Music, Claire Daly was a full-time professional musician - the downbeat for her first job came mere hours after she picked up her diploma. And while she admits that over the last two decades she has often found herself wondering why she ever thought going on the road was glamorous, she has never stopped working, and she has never looked back.

Claire has been working steadily since she moved to New York in the mid-eighties, after stints as a tenor saxophonist with two different Boston-based rock groups, and decided to make the baritone her primary instrument. (She went to check out a baritone that another musician was selling; after blowing one note, she says, she knew that "this is it, this is where I live, this is what makes sense to me.") Partly because the number of musicians who have truly mastered that cumbersome beast of a horn is small, and partly because she is an unusually versatile and adaptable player, she has been asked to do pretty much everything there is for a working musician to do: weddings, restaurant gigs, work with Latin and R&B bands, and so on.

She also spent seven years with the all-female big band Diva and has a long-running association with the brilliantly off-center jazz pianist and composer Joel Forrester, who calls her the ideal interpreter of his music, and whom she in turn calls "incredible" and "one of the most important people in my musical life." Claire self-deprecatingly describes herself as "making a living in music, if you call that living," but she has clearly done much more than that.

The one thing Claire Daly has not done is record her own album - until now. Because it is a new session led by a female instrumentalist - something of which there have been distressingly few in the more than 80 years since the first jazz records were made - Swing Low rates at least passing mention in the history books. More importantly, it is a showcase for a gifted improviser who deserves to be heard, and a thoroughly satisfying example of what she herself refers to as "big fat swing".

Claire Daly is not one to wear her influences on her sleeve. "I've never literally tried to sound like somebody else," she says. "I would rather emulate where they're coming from than what they're actually playing." But like her formidable role models Rollins and Kirk (and like the many baritone saxophonists whose work she loves, including Serge Chaloff, Leo Parker and Ronnie Cuber), she is never afraid to put her heart there, for all the world to hear. She says that the quality she wants her playing to convey is "a warmth." I say she's achieved her goal.