



RECORDINGS



Vocally Owned

The Bobs
Rhapsody in Bob (Bobs Records)

Rhapsody in Bob

We expect an eclectic array of songs on each new Bobs CD, but the latest self-produced and issued by the a cappella quartet is the most wide-ranging collection yet. Each of the group's past dozen discs features at least one original song (and these are originals good enough to stand alongside their covers of the tried-and-true), but this one consists entirely of songs by others. And it culminates in their outrageous version of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.

The current lineup features a new tenor, if by tenor you mean "singer who more than straddles the tenor range and adds amazing vocal effects, percussive and otherwise," in the person of Dan "Bob" Schumacher. And he has added enough of a personalized stamp to one of the group's favorites, the Cream classic *White Room* that it's rerecorded here, more than a decade after its first Bobs waxing, with a new guitar solo voiced by Amy "Bob" Engelhardt that you'll be hard pressed to tell from the real thing.

Tom Petty, They Might Be Giants, Louis Jordan, Lotte Lenya - what a lineup of singers to salute! Yet here they are: Petty's *Freefallin'*, another Dan-and-Amy feature, and *Alabama Song*, from a Brecht-Weill musical play (but also recorded by the Doors), showing Matthew "Bob" Stull at his most plaintive. And its sardonic humor effectively contrasts with the rest of the playlist, which includes the rousing *Ain't Nobody Here But Us Chickens*, a bouncy R&B tune, and the just-plain-strange *Dinner Bell* from TMBG.

Once you hear the robust, gravelly bass voice of Richard "Bob" Greene, one of the group's founders, you count on his occasional showpieces. On this disc it's Eddie Davis' *Teenage Brain Surgeon*, a song also covered by Spike Jones but never more effective than here, in Greene's forbidding tones.

Rhapsody in Blue, which burst on the scene in 1924 and shook up the classical music world with its newest, baddest addition, has resisted goofy arrangements (although Larry Adler did wrest a harmonica version out of it). To lose the orchestra would threaten to lose its essence, but the Bobs have reimagined the textures and tone of the jazz-band-with-strings nature of the beast and found a wealth of vocal and percussive effects to enhance what amounts to their own (a cappella) orchestration.

Pianist Bob Malone has formidable jazz chops, and he's an engaging singer-songwriter as well. In his role of soloist with the instruments-free orchestra, he doesn't always come in with the classical precision we're used to from big-name soloists, but he does something better, taking jazzy side trips from the score that work wonderfully in this context.

It's a 17-minute tour de force, trumping such classical-music invaders as Tomita and Emerson, Lake, and Palmer because it takes the original to a new and interesting place, with Gershwin's energy and wit intact. Any fan of the human voice will enjoy the unusual directions this disc takes.

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