



HER TOWN

Jazz singer-songwriter Gracie Terzian and her harp ukulele are turning heads
BY PAT MORAN

Not too long ago, 24-year-old jazz singer and songwriter Gracie Terzian was watching ukulele videos on YouTube when she saw “this crazy instrument.” The instrument in question was a harp ukulele, “a normal ukulele with an extra arm that holds bass harp strings,” Terzian explains. While the instrument’s appearance caught the young musician’s eye, it was the sound that convinced her to pool her savings to buy a limited-edition aNueNue tenor harp ukulele.

The harp ukulele’s rich tones and jazz voicings figure prominently on Terzian’s new debut EP, *Saints and Poets*. It

showcases six challenging yet accessible original songs—all co-written by Terzian—conveyed in her cool, sophisticated alto, which barely contains the passions bubbling underneath. The EP was conceived as Terzian’s calling card to the New York jazz scene. It exceeded her wildest expectations, climbing the jazz charts of both Billboard and iTunes.

“I released it without a record label. It didn’t get any radio play. I don’t have a manager, and I didn’t hire a publicist until after it was released,” Terzian says, laughing. “So, yeah, it was definitely a surprise.”

Much like the harp guitar,

the harp ukulele is experiencing a resurgence in popularity with young players like Terzian, long after its early-20th-century heyday. The extra strings on Terzian’s spruce-top, mahogany-any-body instrument add a deep tone to the ukulele, she says, and can be plucked like bass notes. “The harp strings come in handy when you’re looking for color chords,” Terzian adds.

Show of Her Own

Growing up in northern Virginia, Terzian fell in love with the jazz albums her father played at home. “I can’t remember a time when I didn’t love music,” she says. She

started dancing when she was four and was acting professionally by 12; soon, she was working in theater in Washington, DC, adding a bit of independent film and industrial work. She feels that her acting experience informs her singing: “Both are performance outlets.” Yet there is one crucial difference.

“When you’re an actor, you do what you’re told [and] you’re a small piece of the puzzle. When you’re a musician, you’re doing your own show, so you’re the director as well.”

While attending the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Terzian played Eva

Perón in a campus production of *Evita*, “a vocally demanding and emotionally powerful role,” she recalls. A stint singing with a UVA jazz combo proved equally challenging and stimulating.

“I started working on vocalese stuff, writing lyrics to famous jazz solos,” Terzian says. One of those solos was Miles Davis’ winding trumpet line on his recording of Wayne Shorter’s “Iris.” When vibraphonist Warren Wolf came to play with UVA’s big band, Terzian was invited to perform “Iris” with them.

Terzian would later take her “Iris” lyrics and apply them to a song on *Saints and Poets*, also called “Iris.” “It’s the same words with different chords and a different melody,” she says, “but it shares a similar spirit.”

As she completed her undergraduate work, Terzian was writing and amassing an impressive body of songs. Plans to record and release this material solidified when she started collaborating with her jazz piano teacher, Wells Hanley, who has worked with jazz heavyweights such as Chris Potter and Wynton Marsalis.

“We realized we made a good writing team,” she notes, and her piano class became a de facto songwriting class. She and Hanley continued to collaborate after Hanley left UVA to work closer to his home in Richmond.

As Terzian ramped up her songwriting, she also started “getting serious” about harp ukulele. After buying the aNueNue, she went about teaching herself how to play it. “I printed out a map of all the notes on the fretboard and

memorized them,” she says. Comparing ukulele chords to piano chords, she started to find appropriate chord voicings on her uke’s fretboard. Inspired by this process, she devised her own tuning for jazz ukulele.

“I got so frustrated with the way ukulele was tuned for jazz chords that I started fiddling around with alternate tunings.” Wanting a low G flat in her chords, she tuned the G string down to a G flat. “I kept wanting E flats high on the neck as well, so I tuned the E to an E flat,” she says. “When I did that, it became a lot easier to find jazz harmonies in close proximity to one another on the fretboard.”

Terzian is documenting her new tuning with a library of flash cards, and she plans to put her system online, making it free for anybody to use.

“I’d like to say [devising the tuning] was calculated,” Terzian says, but admits the process was intuitive and open to chance.

Chance also intervened on a trip to New York City, where Terzian came down with a bad cold. Cooped up in a friend’s apartment, she started writing the words and the swaying, relaxed melody of a song that would become the *Saints and Poets* title track.

“I read plays for lyrical inspiration,” explains Terzian of the title. It’s a quote from Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*: “Does anyone ever realize life while they live it? Saints and poets maybe.”

“I always loved that line,” Terzian says. “It’s been echoing in my head for a while.”

The dialog comes from a scene in the play where the

‘I love poetry and music, so putting the two together is awesome. It’s my life’s creative expression.’

GRACIE TERZIAN

character Emily returns from the dead to witness her life. The sounds and sensations overwhelm Emily; Terzian can relate.

“Sometimes it’s hard to take everything in. Life goes by so quickly, and I’m often overwhelmed by the beauty of things around me.”

Hearing It Out Loud

When the time came to track her debut EP, Terzian had already graduated from UVA and moved to New York. She returned to Richmond to record the sessions with Hanley, and after whittling down the song selection to six tunes, the pair entered Spacebomb Studios. Studio engineer Trey Pollard also played guitar on the album, along with drummer Brian Caputo and bass player Randall Pharr. Both Caputo and Pharr gigged extensively in Charlottesville, so Terzian was familiar and comfortable with their playing.

“We hadn’t played with each other before,” Terzian says. “We came together, had one rehearsal, and then we hit the studio.”

The resulting tunes are sexy, swinging, and buoyant, crackling with the energy of sympathetic musicians playing together in the same room.

“The recording is completely acoustic,” Terzian says. “There are no electronic instruments.”

Terzian’s harp ukulele, climbing, ringing, and ever-so-slightly dissonant, comes to the fore on “Love Rest.” The plaintive melody pirouettes as delicately as a madrigal, while Terzian’s breathy croon bids farewell to a past love and



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wishes him peace.

“I had only played [these songs] before with piano or ukulele and voice,” she says. “Hearing it in your head is not the same as hearing it out loud. I had no idea how they would sound with other instruments.”

Judging from the commercial and critical reception of *Saints and Poets*, she needn’t have worried. Noted jazz historian Terry Teachout, author of *Pops: A Life of Louis*

Armstrong and Duke: A Life of Duke Ellington, calls Terzian a “deep-dyed romantic who tells her tales of modern love with quiet delicacy and an inborn musicality that’s impossible to overlook.” For a debut by a previously unknown performer, consisting of all original material, the collection of rave reviews is striking. In addition, her YouTube videos have helped to raise her profile—perhaps fitting for an artist whose own learning and

discovery process was largely conducted online.

“I originally did *Saints and Poets* because Wells and I had written these songs and we thought, ‘Well, we’re not playing them. Why don’t we record them—and play them with other musicians?’ The whole point of the EP was to hear those songs come to life.”

Those songs and others are currently coming alive during Terzian’s rooftop residency at Bar Hugo in Soho, where she performs with her trio.

Though the players assembled in New York City, they all come from back home.

“I’ve known the bass player Charlie Himel since I was little,” she says. “The drummer, Graham Doby, is from Charlottesville, and guitarist Brett Jones went to UVA. They call themselves the New Dominion Trio because they’re all from Virginia, the Old Dominion state, but now they live in New York.”

Onstage, Terzian plays her aNueNue, running a Fishman AG-UKE custom pickup into a DV Mark amp. She recently acquired a Konablast electric tenor ukulele, which she plans to work into her gigs. Handcrafted from ash by luthier Bruce Herron, the Konablast is patterned on a soprano model made for and designed with the late Allman Brothers bassist Allen Woody.

“It’s solid-body, and it has steel strings like a guitar,” she says. “It’s very cool.”

Although Terzian has folded a few jazz standards into her repertoire and hinted that she may even record a few in the future, she remains focused on creating her own new music—often highlighted, of course, by her inimitable jazz ukulele work. “I prefer doing original music over cover songs,” Terzian says. “My favorite part of the music-making process is writing.”

“I love poetry and music, so putting the two together is awesome. It’s my life’s creative expression. As an actor, you’re telling another person’s story, which can be very fulfilling, but I want to tell my story, with my words. Music is the way I do it.”