

# Cheryl Fisher

## Articles

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Arts and Leisure



### UM music program brought her to South Florida Seeking degree, singer also gets mate, career

By Matt Schudel

It was going to be two years and out for Cheryl Fisher. She had come south from her native Canada to enroll in the graduate jazz program at the University of Miami's School of Music in 1998 with the goal of earning a master's degree in jazz singing. "I wanted to go home and teach," she says. "This was going to be a very rare degree there."

But while she was methodically building her future, that funny thing called life got in the way. She had planned to go straight back to Calgary, but that was before she met Eric Allison, a longtime South Florida jazz musician, and was married last year. Something of a minor star in Canada, Fisher is trying to gain a musical foothold on American soil.

"I'm hoping to find my niche here," says Fisher, who may be a complete unknown in the United States but is well-regarded in her homeland. She has been profiled on nationwide television and has performed twice at the prestigious Montreal Jazz Festival. She has been hailed as Canada's "new diva of jazz" and as "one of the greatest female singers in the history of Canadian jazz"—all this in the country that gave us Diana Krall.

Fisher has been singing jazz for 20 years, but she has never been merely a "jazz singer." She is a mother, a teacher, a student, a songwriter and a record label owner. For years, while singing in nightclubs in Edmonton and Calgary, she was teaching English and special education by day. She designed a curriculum for children with learning disabilities that was adopted throughout Canada. "I've had so many different ways of touching people," says Fisher. "I think it helps me see a broader spectrum of my audience."

Fisher was born in Edmonton, Alberta, and was one of six children. "Music was a central, integral part of my family life," she recalls. All the children in the family learned to play an instrument (piano, in her case) and to sing. "We were doing three- and four-part harmonies in the car." Fisher married young and had a son, now grown, whom she raised alone after a divorce.

Living in Calgary, she met some musicians and asked for the chance to sing. She had grown up as a fan of Motown, but during Calgary's oil boom of the 1980's she found herself working in lounges that—hard as it is to believe—actually wanted jazz. She learned on the job and found a new vocation. She is unusual among singers because she is more inspired by instrumentalists than by other singers. Her favorites are pianist Bill Evans, guitarists Joe Pass and Pat Metheny and "early Miles Davis."

In 1988, she moved to Europe for two years, where she had nothing less than a revelation. "That was the place I started to believe there was something I could offer," she says. "I will never forget being on the cobblestoned streets of Paris, and we started playing. All of a sudden, this little crowd began to gather. I looked out, and there was a sea of people. There were kids and grandparents, people of all backgrounds, and all these people were listening to me sing. I thought, wow, this is unbelievable."

Returning to Canada, she continued to sing and recorded the first of her three albums on her own label, Catfish Records. Even with her success, Fisher wanted to learn more about the music she was performing. "I had reached my ceiling," she says. "I'd never had a vocal lesson before. You can only go so far on your own."

Because no Canadian university offered a graduate degree in jazz singing, Fisher came south to the University of Miami, which has one of the strongest programs in the country. She got up at 6 every morning and concentrated on her studies, learning music theory and proper vocal techniques. "She's very dedicated," says Rachel Lebon, one of her UM professors. "Our master's program is probably the most challenging one around. There are very few people who are able to complete their degree in just two years."

Fisher is now an adjunct professor of voice at the university. In the fall of 1999, Allison was teaching jazz history at UM—the first time he ever taught—when Fisher lent him a rare documentary on Bix Beiderbecke, a brilliant and doomed cornetist of the 1920's.

"Bix Beiderbecke brought us together," Allison jokes. They were married in September 2000, and this past summer embarked on a three-week Canadian tour, culminating in Fisher's second appearance at the Montreal Jazz Festival.

"It was exhausting but invigorating," says Allison. "The audiences were great, uniformly. I fell in love with the country and the people. No matter where we were, you could tell the people appreciated quality. The hippest audience was in Medicine Hat, in the middle of the Alberta prairie."

"I would love for us to become another Cleo Laine and John Dankworth," says Fisher, speaking of the popular British jazz couple. "Music is a wonderful thing to share."

"I love connecting with the audience," she says, "but I'm not a performer who lives to be onstage. My main focus is to touch people, to move them through music."

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Vol. 32 No. 2

**CHERYL FISHER,  
JOYRIDE: Life In The Jazz Lane,  
CATFISH 10313**

by Alan Bargebuhr

*In A Mellow Tone / i Can Dream, Can't I? / j'Adore / Speak Low / /// Forget You / Joyride / The Girl's Colors / Heart's Desire / Beautiful Love / Lets Get Lost / Dear Bix / / Found Love (Up Jumped Spring) / Girl Talk 53.55,*

Fisher, vcl, arr; Phillip Strange, p; Neil Swainson, b; Reg Schwager, g; Terry Clarke, d; Eric Allison, ts, as, flt, cl, arr. 2005, Toronto, Canada.

Cheryl Fisher's fourth CD, her first since earning a master's degree in "Jazz Vocal Performance" at the University of Miami, is truly a gift from Canada, where her talent has already been well and duly recognized. She's a singer with both intelligence and a certain reckless audacity, plus the vocal technique to synthesize her conception of a Performance with the execution thereof. Her soprano voice is warm, clear and free of affectation, and her grasp of rhythmic phrasing as confident as it is fluent. There is both textural depth and breadth to her sound. She can be considered, therefore, a natural born Jazz singer, with the requisite instinct for improvisatory adventure. Even though there is some overdubbing of Eric Allison's panoply of horns (as on "Can't I?"), to suggest production pretensions, this is a session on which the singer and her tight bright backing band are, for the most part, sweating happily together.

Cheryl prefaces "Mellow" with a bustling verse of her own devising, backed by Neil Swainson's resonant bass, gears down into the familiar Ellington classic, and demonstrates her vocal control with a deliciously sustained insistence on the phrase, "joy unknown," before she defers to some Farlowish guitar from Reg Schwager. Joy known, I'd say.

The entire band is present for the boppish take on "Can't I?" with our vocalist contributing some horn-like vocalese/scat midway through. "Speak Low," is lifted on the strength of her interpolated digression into an interior song of her own, designed to comment on Ogden Nash's lyrics. This is apparently not an altogether innovative vocal ploy, as it has been utilized by no less a paragon of the vocal arts than Meredith D'Ambrosio, who, according to this CD's notes, has anointed it as the "paraphrase song."

"Forget" is a soaring ballad from the Broadway show, "Scarlet Pimpernel," and "Heart's Desire," a more reflective ballad, both of which receive nicely shaded readings. The latter carries one of Dave Frishberg's more conventional lyrics, wed—in this case—to an Alan Broadbent melodic line. "Bix" returns us to the antic Frishberg we all know and love, even though I came away thinking that here Ms. F. makes a slight miscalculation, in as much as she treats it as more an earnest plea than the melancholy rumination I've always thought it to be.

Cheryl takes "Beautiful" for a scorching up tempo ride, with bits of wild scat strewn about. Phillip Strange solos effectively. She opens "Lost" with the rarely heard verse, then validates her audacity with more scat and some O'day-ish phrasing. "Joyride" and "J'Adore" are her own tunes, and suggest a somewhat puckish turn of mind, as exemplified by such lines as, "and in my heart I keep you still/part of this against my will." She converts Freddie Hubbard's "Spring" into her own "Found Love," with some relatively less pungent original lyrics, but the arrangement, with unison flute 'n scat, works well, lending the track a certain cheerful vivacity. "Girl Talk" is bossa-fied, with crisp drum breaks from Terry Clarke, as Ms. F. delivers the lyrics and scat with the brazen insouciance one might expect from someone burning rubber "in the Jazz lane."

A strong session from north of the border, one that deserves to be heard on both sides of same.

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# Cheryl Fisher

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CD Reviews

**Cheryl Fisher**  
**Joyride**  
**Catfish Records, IPJ10313**

By Nick Lavigne

With her fourth album *Joyride*, Canadian jazz vocalist Cheryl Fisher continues to match her technical brilliance and emotionally vibrant voice with her unique approach to music. It also doesn't hurt when you surround yourself with some of the country's best jazz musicians either. Here, Fisher is supported by Neil Swainson on bass, Terry Clarke on drums, pianist Phillip Strange, guitarist Reg Schwager, and the multitalented reed player/husband Eric Allison. Having earned a masters in music at the University of Miami School of Music, and being honored at the Festival International de Jazz de Montreal, it's no wonder why Fisher has turned so many heads her way over the past few years and continues to do so as one of Canada's most important jazz singers.

*Joyride* kicks off with the Ellington classic "In a Mellow Tone" with Swainson swinging the band along with his buoyant bass lines underneath Fisher's relaxed phrasing of the melody into the doubletime solo section. Right away it's easy to hear how sonically beautiful this album is going to be. Engineer Dennis Patterson does an incredible job making each instrument resonant and clear, capturing the charming acoustic nuances of jazz music.

The Knighton/Wildhorn song "I'll Forget You" is delivered in a dark and somber manner, creating a beautifully haunting yet moving atmosphere. The empathy flows effortless within the ensemble as Fisher sings the lyrics as only someone who has experienced them can.

"*Joyride*," the poignant title track penned by Fisher, displays her talents as a thoughtful and tasteful composer. Strange and Allison keep the energy and integrity of the song alive throughout their solos before Fisher powerfully restates the melody on this joyful track. Nothing cools down as they move into the jovial "The Girls Colors." Clarke and Swainson keep the pocket deep as Fisher and Allison flawlessly execute unison lines together. Fisher's ability to confidently and cleanly employ eighth notes and triplets with the accuracy of a horn is impressive to say the least.

Cheryl Fisher and her band have created an album in which one could easily lose themselves in, which is a fantastic testament to all involved. With its clever arrangements and superb musicianship, this ensemble makes everything on *Joyride* sound easy, simple, and more importantly, enjoyable. *Joyride* will easily please casual listeners of jazz as well as the most die-hard fans of the genre.

*Cheryl*

# Cheryl Fisher

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**Cheryl Fisher**  
***Joyride: Life In The Jazz Lane***  
**Catfish Records IPJ10313**

By Dorothy L. Hill

Cheryl Fisher, vocals; Terry Clarke, drums; Neil Swainson, string bass; Phillip Strange, piano; Reg Schwager, guitar; Eric Allison, saxophones, flute and clarinet.

Long established in Canada, Cheryl Fisher took off two years to earn a master's degree in Jazz vocal performance from The University of Miami and now has released her fourth CD.

Fisher leads off with an original verse on "In A Mellow Tone" with easygoing graceful vocals backed by Swainson laying down the beat on bass and Schwager accompanying on an inventive guitar excursion. These two members of the band were long associated with George Shearing and that influence is apparent in their sensitive accompaniment.

"J'Adore" is a gorgeous original with flute accompaniment and Fisher shaping the melody with poetic precision. Fisher explores a dark sentimental "I'll Forget You" with dusky intonation. The title cut, "Joyride," features a subtly flavored piano solo and elegantly spare tenor saxophone solo to complement Fisher's rich phrasing. A delightful samba romp on "The Girl's Colors" demonstrates Fisher masterfully exploring a tricky torrent of words and soaring scattling. Fisher wrote lyrics for the Freddie Hubbard tune retitled as "I Found Love (Up Jumped Spring)" and her vocals fluidly work around the melody. A highlight is the Dave Frishberg tune "Dear Bix" punctuated by Fisher's poignant touch to the lyrics and smartly set off with an exquisite clarinet solo by Allison.

Fisher is an extraordinary vocalist who cunningly uses her instrument in such a way as to delight the senses with exquisite phrasing.

The intelligently written liner notes were written by Matt Schudel of The Washington Post. His description of the tunes and their origin is succinct and enjoyable reading. This CD contains a total of thirteen tracks and every one is superb. Most highly recommended!

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London, England

## JAZZ ON CD

**CHERYL FISHER**  
***Too Late To Hurry***  
**Royalty Records**

By Earl Okin

There's a fine line for jazz singers to tread between instantly recognized individuality and contrived gimmickry. Too many recent young singers have stepped unwarily across that line. They should listen to Cheryl Fisher and learn! I heard Miss Fisher a few years ago when she was in London and immediately recognized a unique "voice". If she was good then, she's even better now.

This new CD mixes a series of classic but not over-performed standards with some poetry-based, self-penned new songs, with accompaniments ranging from a sextet down to solo backing group she's chosen some young musicians whom I didn't know but perhaps I ought to have done. They're good! Pitched in what I might call the Modern-mainstream style, this expensive sounding CD should appeal to Jazz lovers of all but extreme tastes. Despite the studio-based nature of this collection, one is given the impression of a bunch of professionals having fun together. Nevertheless, despite all the talent on display here, what stays with you afterwards is the smoky, vulnerable yet surprisingly resilient voice of Cheryl Fisher, her musicality of phrasing and the warmth of personality that comes through everything she does.

My advice is – buy this CD and play it to study, to enjoy, to dance to or to play behind that romantic dinner...but play it! And, when it comes to an end just press the replay button—because you'll want to.

*Cheryl*

# Cheryl Fisher

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# Calgary Mirror

Great Escapes

**Alberta's jazz diva Masters her craft**

By Alex Frazer-Harrison

When you think of jazz, places like Bragg Creek and Sylvan Lake don't immediately come to mind.

Yet for Alberta's own jazz diva Cheryl Fisher, not only does she celebrate the beauty of the vocal style known as jazz—she's also sharing pieces of her life in Alberta with audiences around the world.

"If it is a good tune, it touches people on a universal level," Fisher said on the phone from her home in Sylvan Lake.

"The feeling of being comfortable and at home...it's all universal.

"My daughter-in-law tells me my style is 'acid-folk'," she laughed.

"I think in jazz there's a lot of room for new approaches."

Fisher has been a well-known face on the local jazz scene for several years now, appearing in clubs and recording two popular CDs, *Slow Hand Jazz* and *Too Late to Hurry*.

Fisher came into jazz by way of pop, and credits musician Ernie Castle and a relative who used to teach opera at the University of Calgary for steering her in the direction of jazz.

"Jazz is having a huge resurgence—there's a new generation of swing lovers who are really young," she said, adding jazz appeals to music lovers wanting to go to that next level above swing music—she compares it to drinking champagne.

"You start off liking stuff that's sweet and bubbly...Baby Duck...but as you listen to jazz more and more you want to listen to other types of jazz—you get tired of Baby Duck and want to try a drier wine."

Fisher enjoys composing her own music, or writing lyrics to older instrumental pieces. Although she says she isn't "up to snuff" yet to accompany herself on piano, she doesn't rule that out in the future.

This fall, Fisher returns to the University of Miami School of Music to complete her Master's degree in Jazz Vocal Performance. But before she goes, she'll be showcasing at two locations in Calgary over the next couple of weeks—audiences will be able to hear some of the songs she plans to perform as part of her thesis next year.

Fisher said she wants her degree so that she can better communicate with fellow musicians, "in their first language."

And that, she says, will translate into even better music, compositions and performances for her audiences.

Cheryl Fisher and Friends perform July 23 and 24 at Charlie's Wine Bar and Grille, 501 17 Ave. S.W. Call 229-2090 for more information.

Later, from Aug. 5 to 7, Fisher will team up with guitarist Allan Vance at the Embarcadero, 208 17 Ave. S.E. Call 263-0848 for more information on that gig.

Fisher returns to the University of Miami later in August.

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# Cheryl Fisher

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A South Florida Guide to Red Hot Jazz,  
Blues, Swing & Big Band Music

**Vocalist Cheryl Fisher**

By Ginny Crawford

### ***"One of the greatest female singers in the history of Canadian jazz"***

The quote above is how the Festival International de Jazz de Montreal billed Cheryl Fisher this year at her encore performance there. A musical transplant from Canada to our South Florida scene, she will make a series of appearances in October to promote her newest CD, "God Bless the Child/Live in Concert", released nationally across Canada this past summer. Fisher has just returned from an extensive and successful tour of Canadian festivals, performing and promoting the new release.

This CD is her third production and represents a new level in her musical, composing and arranging talents, the seeds of which are already evident on two previous releases, "Slow Hand Jazz" and "Too Late to Hurry." Cheryl Fisher spent several years performing in Canada and on the international scene, working clubs in Paris and London as well as in the US, performing and studying with great artists like Scott Hamilton, Mark Murphy, Nancy King and Madeline Eastman. With a recently earned Masters Degree in Jazz Vocal Performance from the University of Miami under her belt, she's now pursuing her goal to broaden her already established Canadian recording and performing career and dedicate more of her time to writing. While studying at UM she met her faculty instructor, saxophonist/flautist Eric Allison, where a mutual love of Bix Beiderbecke brought them together. Now married, their musical collaboration is beautifully reflected on two selections from "God Bless the Child," Michael Franks' "You Were Meant For Me", and Charles Mingus' "Goodbye Porkpie Hat". She refers to the musicians on this album as "hand-picked jewels." They include Canadian jazz giants saxophonist P.J. Perry and pianist Tommy Banks, as well as guitarist John Stowell, pianist Phil Strange, and reedman/husband, Eric Allison.

Jack Sohmer, Jazz Times and Downbeat writer/reviewer has written of her talent in the liner notes: "Cheryl Fisher is a bona fide jazz singer, one who approaches her material, whether standard or self-composed, with the ear of an improvising hornman. Indeed, given her range and sonority, her voice could easily be taken for that of an alto sax endowed with the gift of speech...she does not engage in feats of vocal acrobatics or tortured restructurings of the composers' original melodies...an approach more like that of the still under-appreciated Sheila Jordan...an understanding of what jazz line improvisation is all about...a jazz singer of striking originality."

On Friday, October 5<sup>th</sup> she will be interviewed from 1-2:00 p.m. on WLRN's (91.3 FM) Tropical Currents radio show hosted by Ed Bell. The Cheryl Fisher Trio will perform on-air featuring Eric Allison on reeds and Bob Hanni on guitar.

Wednesday, October 10<sup>th</sup>, at 7:45 p.m. she will be featured in the Gold Coast Jazz Society's "Hit Parade of the 1940's" concert at the Amaturio Theater in the Broward Center for the Performing Arts. Accompanying her will be some of South Florida's finest musicians. This performance will be repeated at noon on Tuesday, October 23<sup>rd</sup>, for the Broward County Main Library, 100 S. Andrews Avenue in Fort Lauderdale.

On Sunday, October 28, from 2:30-6:30 p.m. there will be a CD Release Party at O'Hara's Pub, in Fort Lauderdale featuring Cheryl's sextet.

Don't miss a chance to see why this jazz singer has won raves from reviewers like Canadian broadcasting icon Vick Gabereau for being "one of the best jazz singers we've ever produced in this country" and Bill Somers of Jazz Notes who describes Cheryl as "an exotic bird, perhaps the closest female singer yet to a mellow trumpet, she has a feeling for rhythm few singer share...(She creates) the same kind of excitement that Miles created with the most ordinary of tunes".

This month offers multiple opportunities to hear how this commanding, natural performer is capable of transforming a chatty crowd into a rapt audience with her musicality and personal warmth.

Cheryl

# Cheryl Fisher

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### Fisher in fast lane

By Mike Bell

It seems odd when **Cheryl Fisher** talks about having a little trepidation before she went to Toronto to record her latest CD *Joyride: Life In the Jazz Lane*.

The vocalist says she was a little intimidated by the reputations of the players she was about to record with.

I'm certain the musicians could say the exact same thing about Fisher.

The one-time fixture on the local scene—she now divides her time between Alberta and Florida—is one of this country's brightest and best jazz voices, having honed her instrument over the past two decades performing and studying at home and abroad.

"There are no shortcuts to mastering your craft—there are just no shortcuts," says the woman, who also teaches the art. "You have to put the hours in, you have to spend the time and you have to get the experience."

That experience—earned everywhere from Paris to Vancouver—is clearly evident on her third and latest disc.

*Joyride* is a sleek open-air ride through contemporary jazz, driven by superb playing and, primarily, Fisher's cool, alluring delivery that sounds as effortless and as magical as merely drawing a breath.

It's also Fisher at her most accessible—something she says she had to learn was an OK thing to be, which she did when she was, not surprisingly, studying in the U.S.

"There's nothing that will break you out of your shell than when you're put into situations where you're dealing with 20-year-old divas who want to be the next **Whitney Houston** and are willing to do anything to succeed," she says of her time at the U of Miami.

"It was a real eye-opener for me...I realized it was OK to be centre stage, you're supposed to be centre stage, you're supposed to be comfortable in that spotlight."

The spotlight deservedly shines on Fisher tonight as she celebrates the release of *Joyride: Life In the Jazz Lane*.

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# Cheryl Fisher

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MAGAZINE

### Her Venus Signature

By Diana Murray

When the muse and her mirror meet, a unique energy is created. So artist Barbara Bickel and jazz diva Cheryl Fisher discovered when they began collaborating in May; the results can be seen and heard at the Centre Gallery, November 18 to December 20.

"Her Venus Signature" is a powerful combination of female artistic expression. Bickel's mixed media figures act as the canvas that shapes the stories to be told and Fisher's musical compositions give voice to the storytelling.

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The two women met three years ago at one of Bickel's exhibition openings, got to know one another and decided to join forces. Both had wanted to work with another female artist because of a strong conviction that "collaboration with other women in art is so much more inspiring."

It was the philosophy of American artist Hannah Wilke that moved them. A fearless advocate of the female-based art form, Wilke coined the term "Venus Envy," which she defines as the envy of the beauty and sexuality of women. According to Wilke, because of Venus envy, women's power and beauty are seen as threatening forces and act to separate women from other women and also from men. "Her Venus Signature" is an exploration of how Venus envy has affected and shaped the lives of these two women.

In the months leading up to the exhibition, Bickel would work on a painting, then give it to Fisher who would write a piece of music to go with it. Sometimes this process worked the other way with the song coming first. Fisher, known primarily as a jazz singer (she's performed in Paris jazz clubs, at Montreal's Jazz Festival and released *Slow Hand Jazz*, a highly acclaimed CD on the market), has delved into a style that is "not necessarily what I'm known for." Instead of jazz, the music she's written lends itself more to a "classical, New Age" sound.

The result is a 20-piece art exhibit, with 16 accompanying songs that will be performed live on the two opening nights, November 22-23, and recorded for the remainder of the exhibit.

Call the Centre Gallery at 243-4615 or 237-0383 for more information.

Cheryl