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## *ANNIE ROSS SING A SONG...*



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# ANNIE ROSS

## SING A SONG...

by Anders Griffen



Photo by Alan Nahigian

Over the course of her almost 80-year performing career, Annie Ross has been faceted and fascinating, which can be seen and heard weekly at the Metropolitan Room. While appearing in stage productions, in movies and on television, Ms. Ross is recognized as one of the great jazz singers of all time. With rare range, dexterity and personality, she makes it seem easy. In 1959, Johnny Mandel, composer and longtime Count Basie arranger, put it like this, "Annie Ross I think is the best singer I've ever heard - in just about all categories. I think she's a marvel and nobody can lay down time like this girl. She's got range [and] a voice that just does everything." These qualities are central to some of her most famous work as the writer and performer of her song "Twisted" and as a member of the jazz vocal group, Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. For decades she was in constant motion between New York, Los Angeles, London, Glasgow ("I'm Scottish," she'll quickly remind you), Paris and touring around the world, never staying in one place for long. Nowadays she spends most of her time at home in New York. Coincidentally, this issue comes out at the same time as the completion of a two-year, grant-funded project at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University in Newark to arrange and describe the personal collections of five women in jazz, Ross among them ([newarkwww.rutgers.edu/IJS/WomenInJazz](http://newarkwww.rutgers.edu/IJS/WomenInJazz)).

Ross has been performing every Tuesday night at the Metropolitan Room in Manhattan for almost a decade. Her full range, in terms of octaves, is no longer available but has expanded in other directions. While she has lost some high notes, she has gained considerable subtlety and refined a great depth and expanse of expression. She gets into character for each song and creates the atmosphere. "You must engage the audience and convince them they're listening to a story," she says. It's a thing of beauty and amazing to behold. She's got the perfect supporting ensemble to realize her vision, her song - and they're all her songs the way she renders them. While Ross is the focus and impetus of the group, Warren Vaché is her right-hand man on the cornet and pianist Tardo Hammer acts as musical director. Drummer Jimmy Wormworth, whose association goes back to Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, grooves easily and, performing with brushes almost exclusively, is incredibly articulate and Neal Miner holds it down on the bass, smiling almost throughout each set. One recent February night, there were no uptempo songs per se, but there were some hard-grooving ones like Horace Silver's "Come on Home" with lyrics by Jon Hendricks and Louis Jordan's "Saturday Night Fish Fry". "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square" was deeply touching and "Violets for Your Furs" was particularly poignant.

Annie Ross was born Annabella Macauley Allan Short on Jul. 25th, 1930 in Mitcham, London to parents who were Scottish vaudevillian performers. Already singing, a young Ross traveled with her parents by ship to New York at age five with hopes she might become the "Scottish Shirley Temple". Her parents returned home after a brief stay, but Ross stayed with

her aunt, singer Ella Logan, probably best known for her 1947 lead performance in *Finian's Rainbow*. Ross traveled with her aunt to her home in Los Angeles and soon after her arrival won a radio contest run by none other than Paul Whiteman, which led to her appearance in an episode of *Our Gang* in 1938, where she put on a spirited performance of "The Bonnie Banks o' Loch Lomond". In 1943 she appeared as Judy Garland's sister, Rosie, in the film *Presenting Lily Mars*. She grew up and was educated in Los Angeles, but only saw her aunt between tours. The young Ross was alone more than she would have liked, but was also exposed to a lot of music both on record and in person as she got to know the likes of Duke Ellington and Erroll Garner. "I used to sing Duke's songs while he played the piano," she recalls. At 16 she briefly attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York before returning home in 1947. She quickly found work with Bernard Hilda, Jack Hylton and Hugh Martin and toured the continent with Jack Diéval and Emil Stern. The influx of black jazz musicians in Paris - Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, John Lewis, Kenny Clarke - persuaded her to stay there and she lived in Paris from 1947-51. In 1950 she recorded her first 78, a date with pianist Diéval. Later that year she toured North Africa and Spain with Hawkins, worked an acting job with Orson Welles back in Paris and gave birth to a son, Kenny Clarke, Jr.

Soon she was back in New York, working supper clubs and studying with Luther Henderson. "He was with Lena Horne for a long time. He opened a company, signing singers - like forming an act. It was an opportunity." In 1952, the year Ross became *DownBeat's* "New Star of the Year", she recorded "Twisted", which was originally recorded by tenor saxophonist Wardell Gray in 1949. Ross penned lyrics to the tune, a practice called *vocalese*, which she helped to make famous with the success of her new recording (available as a bonus track on AVID Jazz' two-CD set compiling four '50s Ross albums). "Twisted", with her lyrics, has since been recorded by Bette Midler, Mark Murphy and, most famously, Joni Mitchell. This was followed by a brief tour with Lionel Hampton before returning to England, where she worked until 1956. During this time she toured and recorded with bandleader Jack Parnell, great saxophonist Tubby Hayes and drummer Phil Seaman. "The straights would sit in the front of the coach and the ravers at the back. I'd be in the back."

In 1957, she became the third member of Lambert, Hendricks & Ross for her "ability to simulate instrumental sounds, extraordinary both in concept and execution," said Leonard Feather, "helped enormously by her range, which is twice that of the average jazz singer." Her instrumental sounds can be heard to great effect on "Everyday I Have the Blues" from their debut, *Sing a Song of Basie*. The group was characterized, in part, by rapid-fire tempos, instrumental virtuosity and improvisation straight from the heart of bebop. With all of the skill and precision required to perform such music, one might think Ross must have put in countless hours of practice.

"I never practiced. I would just learn the song, then work it," she says, "Someone said 'it's a process.' I don't subscribe to the new terms. Learn a tune and know what the words mean. Convince the audience they're listening to a story, sing things that weren't familiar to the public and get a reaction." The group made seven successful albums and won several awards by the time Ross left in 1962.

In 1963 she was briefly married to Sean Lynch while they ran a London cabaret called Annie's Room. Acting next became her focus as Ross continued to work on stage and television in England. In 1978, she starred in the show *Send in the Girls*, in which she played Velma Hardy, a former trombonist with Ivy Benson's All Girls Band. This was during a time, as observed by Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker in their book, *Big Ears*, when emerging scholarship was "dedicated to unraveling issues of sex discrimination, marginalization and the effects of shifting and clashing definitions of masculinity and femininity." It's not to say that women were not heard and recognized in the past. "How could you have Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington," commented Ross, "without having articles and concerts dedicated to women?" In the '80s-90s Ross appeared in several films including *Superman III*, *Throw Momma from the Train* and *Pump Up the Volume*. Perhaps her best movie role came in 1993 in *Short Cuts* by Robert Altman. The movie is based on short stories by Raymond Carver, except for the part of Tess Trainer, which Altman created for Ross. "I became infatuated with her passion for her music," said the director. "She hears a whole band inside her head."

Throughout her career, Annie Ross has moved easily between various film, theater and jazz engagements. These collective experiences make her a unique artist. "It's all related. It's all connected," she says. "Engage the audience." She is one of the few that can remember musical worlds and stages that no longer exist. Her performances at the Metropolitan Room every Tuesday night are a treasure. Everybody who loves jazz and the legacy of popular song should go and enjoy this living legend live and in person. It's truly a New York experience, but it's also part of America's cultural heritage. ❖

For more information, visit [annieross.net](http://annieross.net). Ross is at Metropolitan Room Tuesdays. See Regular Engagements.

#### Recommended Listening:

- Lambert, Hendricks & Ross - *Sing a Song of Basie* (ABC Paramount-Impulse, 1957)
- Annie Ross - *Sings A Song With Mulligan!* (World Pacific-EMI, 1957)
- Annie Ross - *A Gasser!* (World Pacific-Pure Pleasure, 1959)
- Lambert, Hendricks & Ross - *The Hottest New Group in Jazz* (Columbia, 1959)
- Annie Ross - *Sings A Handful Of Songs* (Ember/DCC - Fresh Sound, 1963)
- Annie Ross - *Let Me Sing* (CAP, 2005)