

MUSIC REVIEW

The Boston Globe

## Jazz singer Parlato mesmerizes with dream-like voice

By Steve Greenlee, Globe Staff | October 19, 2009

Gretchen Parlato's voice is a cello. It's a muted trumpet, a trombone. It's an alto saxophone. It's a small child crying out for her mother, a grown woman celebrating the pains of love. It's a conflux where hope, sensuality, and tragedy all merge.

Parlato, 33, who won the 2004 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition and just released a beguiling album, "In a Dream," is an ambitiously original singer with an understated approach. Her voice doesn't rise much above a whisper, and she barely opens her mouth when she sings. She softly moans some lyrics, stretches out individual syllables for two and three bars, and adds wordless vocals that are more like sax solos than scat. More than that, she appears to see herself less as a singer than a musician whose instrument happens to be her voice. She is a fully integrated member of her band.

Her interpretations of jazz standards and pop songs weave American forms with threads from around the world, particularly Latin and South America. Her show Thursday night at the Regattabar was utterly captivating. Backed by a stellar, international rhythm section - Cuban pianist Fabian Almazan, Nigerian-British bassist Michael Olatuja, and drummer Kendrick Scott, a Berklee graduate who grew up in Houston - Parlato (she's from LA) packed 11 rich performances into her set.

It was stunning from the outset. Wearing a tight black dress, hoop earrings, and a new wave hairdo, Parlato gently clapped her hands while uttering quiet noises, her lips slightly pursed. The band joined in, and gradually the sounds gathered and transformed themselves into an airy, vaguely Brazilian rendition of Herbie Hancock's "Butterfly." As she sang, she retreated into the lyrics, singing from the back of her throat, sucking in the words rather than spilling them forth. She sounded more horn than human.

Parlato makes everything her own, too. It was perfectly natural to hear her jazzy version of the forgotten 1992 R&B hit "Weak" followed by the bossa nova "Doralice" (a duet with drums on which she sang in Portuguese) and, later, her shuffling, almost rowdy reimagining of Bill Evans's "Blue in Green." Here's how spellbinding her set was: When she finished a heartbreakingly gorgeous reworking of Monk's "Ugly Beauty" (with lyrics), the crowd sat in transfixed silence for a good eight or nine seconds before applauding. For a singer, there is no higher praise.

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# thejazzbreakfast

## Disc of the day: 13-10-09

2009 OCTOBER 13

by peterbacon

**Gretchen Parlato: *In A Dream* (ObliqSound OS107)** Herbie Hancock has good things to say about this innovative young singer making a great impression in the clubs of New York and elsewhere; so does Wayne Shorter.

She keeps good company, too. On this album Lionel Loueke is on guitar and vocals, Aaron Parks is on piano, Derrick Hodge is on bass and Kendrick Scott is on drums.

Now, I've always considered that one of the hallmarks of good singers, no matter what their genre, is that their singing should sound as natural as their speaking. Take, for example, Michael McDonald. Well, Gretchen Parlato has that quality.

This disc finds her working often as a fifth instrument within the band.

Track two, *Within Me*, is an ideal introduction, Parlato singing in a just-above-a-whisper, bossa-tinged tone against a skittish snare pattern and lovely cushioning piano chords. She is particularly adept at the odd timings and nuanced harmonic changes found in this very cool, very contemporary jazz.

There is a fabulous bit in *In A Dream* where she sings harmony first with Parks's keyboard, then with Loueke's guitar.

There are a quite a few videos on YouTube, taken by audience members at the clubs, which suggest she has considerable stage presence and has been paying her dues in some of the most testing environments.

So it would certainly be worth catching her at Pizza Express as part of the London Jazz Festival in November. Until then, get hold of this CD – it has wormed its way into my player and shown a great reluctance to leave.



**September 24, 2009**

**“Unveils a singer with her own sound, something that often takes many years to achieve.”**

As far as clichés go, there is the jazz singer who scats, and the one who doesn't. That said, there doesn't have to be a never-the-twain-shall-meet divide between the rousing fireworks of Sarah Vaughan and the sultry embers of Billie Holiday, and it could be argued that vocal improvising itself has become even more interesting in the past few decades simply because those two strands have entwined to varying degrees.

A known quantity on the New York jazz scene through appearances with a coterie of progressive players such as the Beninois Lionel Loueke, Gretchen Parlato is a singer whose creativity lies somewhere between those two poles. She has an almost insidious subtlety, personalising a theme by way of improvisations that are often just a few delicately curled phrases that sometimes mirror the hypnotically grainy chords of Loueke's nylon string guitar. Parlato respects melody above all else. Her negotiation of each song is as sensitive as that of the rest of the band – keys, bass, drums – and the lean, spare nature of the arrangements, at times stripped right down to just voice and crisp finger picking, brings a spacious, airborne quality to the work. Tonally, Parlato has moments where she recalls a cultured folk-rock singer such as [Suzanne Vega](#); but for the most part the hazy finesse of a long line of great Brazilian singers, notably Flora Purim, is also discernible. Indeed, a Latin sensibility is very strong, rhythmically as well as vocally, above all on a quite sumptuous reprise of Herbie Hancock's *Butterfly*, a tune that is tailor made for Parlato for its gliding, slow burn lyricism.

Originals such as *Weak* and the title track also impress by the focused economy of their verse-chorus structure but, for the most part, *In a Dream* unveils a singer with her own sound, which is something that often takes many years for young pretenders to achieve, whether the route taken is via the billowing energy of *Sassy* or the vaporous languor of *Billie*.

# Music-biz player flowers onstage

BY ROGER LEVESQUE, FREELANCE    SEPTEMBER 25, 2009

A band of hot bop players and a refreshing new singer are the two notable visiting jazz acts to grace the Yardbird stage this weekend.

Between running Vancouver's busiest jazz club, The Cellar, and putting out 50 CDs on his Cellar Live label since 2000, Cory Weeds has been busy.

But that's only part of the story. Along the way, Weeds has also grown into a gifted tenor saxophonist, composer and bandleader who is able to make the most of his musical connections.

His current touring quintet, set to play the Yardbird tonight, includes New York trumpeter Jim Rotondi, a serious horn man with an impressive set of solo recordings and experience in the Carnegie Hall Jazz Band, among many other credits.

The tour is a reunion of sorts. Weeds and Vancouver pianist Ross Taggart visited New York to play with Rotondi last January, and recorded a studio session that featured original tunes by all three players. Judging by that CD, *Everything's Coming Up Weeds*, recently issued by Cellar Live, you can expect some sizzling work from their show tonight.

The Weeds quintet plays the Yardbird( 102nd Street and 86th Avenue) at 9 p. m. Tickets are \$18 for members,\$ 22 for guests, in advance from Ticketmaster or at the door.

## Parlato takes chances

If her family background is any gauge, singer Gretchen Parlato's fate was sealed early on, and the fact that she's winning praise from the likes of Herbie Hancock is only part of destiny unfolding as it should.

The Los Angeles native was raised in an artistic family. Her father played jazz bass, so she was exposed to lots of jazz influences, singers in particular.

"It was completely normal to me that music was playing all the time," Parlato recalls. "It seemed normal that everyone was an artist, and there was never any question about getting a real job. I was lucky to be spoiled, because music was always considered as important as any other field."

After gaining early experience in music theatre, she enrolled in an arts-oriented high school and made her first public performance at age 15. A subsequent degree in ethnomusicology and jazz from UCLA helped her expand on a universe of possibilities, including Brazilian and African music.

After that, she became the first singer accepted to the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance. In 2003, she moved to New York and started making musical connections. The following year she won the Monk International Jazz Vocal Competition, performing for a jury that would be intimidating to anyone-- Quincy Jones, Kurt Elling, Al Jarreau, Jimmy Scott and Flora Purim.

She's been getting attention ever since, and rightly so. You can hear how jazzy phrasing and taking chances come naturally to Parlato on her excellent new, second album *In a Dream* (ObliqSound), over a range of material from straight-ahead jazz and dreamy ballads to a Brazilian number and a funky cover of Herbie Hancock's *Butterfly*. She co-wrote two of the tunes.

Parlato and her band play the Yardbird Saturday at 9 p. m. Tickets are \$22 for members, \$26 for guests, from Ticketmaster or at the door. This could be the only time you get to see her in a club space, because she will probably be playing concert halls next time around.

### Honours for Dubyk

Congratulations to local saxophonist-bandleader Jerrold Dubyk, who picked up the Best Jazz Album award in the Western Canadian Music Awards last week for his fine CD *The Maverick*.

It's been a particularly fruitful year for the reedman, and his win means all the more considering the general quality of jazz recordings coming out of the Prairies over the past year.

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# The Seattle Times

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## Jazz singer Gretchen Parlato: Her music is pacific, like the ocean

By **Andrew Gilbert**  
Special to *The Seattle Times*

The title of Gretchen Parlato's new album "In a Dream" (Obliqsound) aptly captures the sustained mood of ethereal introspection that she evokes from the first track to the last.

Possessing an enticingly crystalline voice and a ravishing concept deeply informed by samba ballads and bossa nova, Parlato is among the very best of a rising generation of jazz singers, an artist who has taken her own sweet time forging a highly personal sound unlike that of any of her peers.

"For me, the best way to be as an artist is to be completely yourself, letting that vulnerability come through," said Parlato, who makes her Seattle debut as a bandleader at the Triple Door on Wednesday, with pianist Taylor Eigsti, bassist Alan Hampton and drummer Kendrick Scott (heard recently at Jazz Alley with Terence Blanchard).

"The meditative, calm sound is a reflection of my personality," Parlato says. "I've got a silly and a crazy side, but it makes sense the music would come across that way. I do yoga every day and try to keep a sense of peace and calm in my life. I don't have a lot of frantic energy."

You could say that Parlato's music is pacific like the ocean, offering a deceptively cool appearance while roiling with creative energy just below the shimmering surface. Her repertoire is full of unexpected gems, from translucent arrangements of Stevie Wonder's "I Can't Help It" and Björk's "Come To Me" to expertly crafted interpretations of the Wayne Shorter compositions "Juju" and "Footprints," featuring her original lyrics.

Shorter is one of Parlato's biggest supporters. The legendary saxophonist was on the panel with Herbie Hancock and Terence Blanchard when she won a 2001 audition to become the first vocalist admitted to the Thelonious Monk Institute's prestigious two-year master's program.

In 2004, the Los Angeles-raised singer won the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition and used the \$20,000 award to record her first album, an impressive, self-named session featuring pianist Aaron Parks, who grew up in Seattle, and Beninese guitarist Lionel Loueke (a close collaborator since their days at the Monk Institute).



JEANEEN LUND

In 2004, L.A.-raised Gretchen Parlato won the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition.

### Listen

Hear Gretchen Parlato:  
[www.myspace.com/gretchenparlato](http://www.myspace.com/gretchenparlato).

### Jazz preview Gretchen Parlato

7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Triple Door, 216 Union St., Seattle;  
\$15/\$18 (206-838-4333 or [www.tripledoor.com](http://www.tripledoor.com)).

While Parks and Loueke are also essential "In a Dream" contributors, Parlato is touring the West Coast with Grammy-nominated pianist Eigsti, a 24-year-old Bay Area counterpart to Parks who's been performing and recording with veteran improvisers for more than a decade.

Dividing his time between Fender Rhodes and traditional piano, he's ideally equipped to navigate the gossamer textures woven around Parlato's lithe, breathy vocals, whether she's singing wordless lines, English or Portuguese.

"I like to think of it as you would see a painting, something cohesive and complete," Parlato said. "I want there to be a sense of continuity in the music, with all the elements combined in a cohesive way."

*Andrew Gilbert:* [jazzscribe@aol.com](mailto:jazzscribe@aol.com)

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## Washington City Paper

### Breath Analyzer: Gretchen's Parlato's *In a Dream*

By **Michael J. West**

September 9, 2009

Breath of Experience: Parlato wields her windpipe like an old pro.

#### **In a Dream**

**Gretchen Parlato**

ObliqSound

The foremost qualities of jazz vocalist [Gretchen Parlato](#)'s artistry are her breathy gentleness and sensuality—she doesn't sing so much as insinuate. Throughout her latest, *In a Dream*, she exhibits a supple, nuanced airiness that puts the disc leagues ahead of the year's other vocal jazz recordings. It's not just any singer who can, for example, land precisely the irregular rhythmic lunges of Herbie Hancock's "Butterfly" without releasing her grip on the melody's peaks and valleys. Or simultaneously float through the dreamy mood of Duke Ellington's "Azure" and find the sorrow beneath its surface. That approach manifests on the album-opener, a cover of Stevie Wonder's "I Can't Help It"; built into the tune is the thrill of new love, which Lionel Loueke's syncopated guitar and vocalizations seem prepared at the outset to express. When Parlato enters, her near-whispers immediately seem to bridle those sentiments—a sort of seduction through vulnerability—but a more careful listen reveals her extraordinary confidence. Parlato's audible gasps are devices for suspense and rhythm between her sighing phrases ("I can't [gasp] help it [gasp] if I wanted to"). The trick reveals Parlato's mastery of rhythm, which she confirms handily with "On the Other Side" and the bossa nova "Doralice." It doesn't hurt that her accompanists constitute one of jazz's best rhythm ensembles. Loueke, keyboardist Aaron Parks, bassist Derrick Hodge, and drummer Kendrick Scott work together frequently; they know how to balance out each other and a leader like Parlato. "Within Me" finds Hodge and Scott (on cajón) supporting the singer from beneath, while Parks' piano responds to each of her lines. It's Loueke's presence, however, that's crucial—his guitar is the album's most prominent sound apart from Parlato's voice. And Loueke's mouth is a rhythm instrument all its own, with his hums and tongue clicks

acting as bass and drums on “Butterfly” and “Doralice,” and joining as a full backing vocalist on “On the Other Side” and “Azure.” Loueke’s powerful chemistry with Parlato may indeed be the jazz world’s newest great partnership in the Billie Holiday–Lester Young tradition. Recently, jazz has embraced some callow vocalists whose singing is a sideline for their instrumental pursuits. Fortunately, such artists have Parlato to show them how it should be done: with emotional depth, subtlety, and the kind of precise technical craft where even the breathing sounds matter.

**Sep. 10 - 16, 2009 (Vol. 29, #37)**

**TIMES**ONLINE

The London Times  
September 4, 2009

## Gretchen Parlato: In a Dream

### **Can jazz be saved? Gretchen Parlato, bringing in other influences, must be a bright young hope for the greying genre**

Over the summer *The Wall Street Journal* kicked off a minor rumpus with a piece entitled *Can Jazz Be Saved?*, which gave a warning that the audience was speedily getting older and greyer. Responses included a *New York Times* article pointing out that lots of young jazz-influenced musicians were busy working but they just couldn't be pigeonholed into rigid old jazz definitions. Thus the Bad Plus mix up jazz and rock and the pianists Robert Glasper and Jason Moran listen to a lot of hip-hop. Now here's the bright young hope Gretchen Parlato, who brings in R&B and Latin. But however we bracket her, the LA-born singer's way with a song is gently thrilling. In her ethereal, floaty style, she switches from singing lyrics to using her voice as a wordless instrument on ten songs, a mixture of new material and recast tunes by Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock — both fans — and Stevie Wonder. Her breathy, Latin-tinged *I Can't Help It* is as light as a summer breeze and *ESP* shimmers softly. Innovative, atmospheric, melodic — all this lacks, perhaps, is a hooky tune to put her on primetime radio.

**August 26, 2009**

**The International Review of Music**

**By Don Heckman**

**GRETCHEN PARLATO**

**“In A Dream” (Obliqsound)**

There's an enigmatic quality to Gretchen Parlato's singing, a mysterious brew of sound and breath, of simmering inner rhythms and phrasing that curls seductively around the words. It seems to me that it's a quality that was slowly beginning to surface in her earliest work, even while she was still a student at USC's Thelonious Monk Institute. But it's never been more apparent than it is in this mesmerizing, appropriately titled new recording.

The first track, Stevie Wonder's "I Can't Help It," immediately announces that the album is going to be an extraordinary musical experience. Sung with the sole accompaniment of Lionel Loueke's body-moving guitar lines, Parlato's hand claps and clicking sounds, the tune roves from the song itself across individual and collective improvising. And that musical intimacy between Parlato and Loueke continues to be a foundation of many of the songs: their rhythmically layered vocal interaction in Herbie Hancock's "Butterfly"; the blending of their voices in the body percussion-and-vocal version of Dorival Caymmi's "Doralice"; their floating harmonies in Duke Ellington's "Azure"; the back and forth vocal dueting, spiced with accents from Loueke's guitar and Aaron Parks' keyboards in Francis Jacob's delightful "On the Other Side."

There's more, much more: a pair of tunes with Parlato lyrics (the title track, "In A Dream" and "Turning Into Blue"; wordless vocal explorations with her quartet (Loueke, Parks, bassist Derrick Hodge and drummer Kendrick Scott) on Wayne Shorter's "E.S.P."; and an album-wrapping, darkly intense version of SWV's #1 r&b hit, "Weak."

Parlato has been blessed with extraordinary talents — an unerring sense of pitch, utterly relaxed rhythmic clarity, an open ear for harmony. Other singers have similar abilities. But what makes Parlato so unique is the imaginative way in which she uses those skills to rove deeply within the instrumental sounds, while still retaining her presence as the vocal center of the music.

So here's an announcement to the members of the Recording Academy and the Grammy nominating committees: "In A Dream" belongs in the four or five Grammy nominations for Best Jazz Vocal Album (and maybe more than that). Omit it and your credibility — already subject to question — goes out the window.

*Gretchen Parlato performs in Los Angeles at [Catalina Bar & Grill](#) on Mon. Sept. 21.*

**Saturday August 22, 09:33 AM**

# **Billboard CD reviews**

**ARTIST: GRETCHEN PARLATO**

**ALBUM: IN A DREAM (ObliqSound)**

Gretchen Parlato won the prestigious 2004 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition, released her mildly promising self-titled debut the following year and since then has sung in supporting roles on several significant jazz releases. With her second release, "In a Dream," Parlato's time has arrived. So far, the set is the most alluring jazz vocal album of 2009. With an impressive band that includes longtime cohort Lionel Loueke on guitar and wordless vocal, Parlato sings with quiet, relentless and oftentimes unpredictable rhythmic grace. She's playfully rapturous on Stevie Wonder's "I Can't Help It," a samba-esque duet with Loueke; joyfully spirited during an a cappella take on the Brazilian tune "Doralice"; and dreamily sensuous whispering over a clipping drum beat on "Within Me."