

Homegrown Holiday Albums

Halie Loren, Anna Gilbert release classic Yuletide albums BY RICK LEVIN

Currently Eugene is blessed with a two world-class female singer/songwriters, a pair of young but serious career musicians who – despite plying their talents in relatively different genres – bring that transcendent combination of soul, dedication and talent to their craft. When you hear either of their voices, it's difficult to believe that they live among us; they are just that good. And neither are they simply pretty faces and pretty voices: both of these accomplished musicians, veterans despite their years, write and arrange many of their own songs, another rarity in this day in age. These women are the real deal.

In the past couple of years, country/folk singer Anna Gilbert and jazz crooner/composer Halie Loren have found their careers on an upward trajectory: Loren, with several jazz albums including her latest, *After Dark*, recently signed with a Japanese label and has found her songs topping the charts in that country; she has just finished another CD, due out soon. If she hasn't arrived as a formidable jazz artist, she's damn close.

Winner of EW's 2010 *Next Big Thing* song contest for her hauntingly beautiful single "Room To Breathe," Gilbert is garnering similar attention for her engaging artistry. She's worked with some pretty big names in the Nashville scene, and her most recent albums have been exercises in catchy, whispering melodies and bittersweet vocals that are expertly restrained and yet powerfully evocative of the small seismic tremors of life lived, of love and loss.

There are those out there – humbugging Scrooges and present-pilfering Grinches – who seem to take masochistic pleasure in harrumphing the holidays, almost on principle. And yet, even with all the acknowledged stress and familial fallout brought on by this festive time of year, it's difficult to resist the sentimental pull of a well-conceived, nicely achieved Christmas album. Set aside the connotations of consumerism and crass commercialization, and many of our holiday classics are just darn good songs: the yearning promise of "I'll Be Home for Christmas," the cosmic peace of "Silent Night," the snowbound bonhomie of "Winter Wonderland" and, perhaps the finest of the lot,



"The Christmas Song," with its warm imagery and generosity of spirit.

For many of us, nothing sparks the holiday spirit and kick starts the season like a spin of our favorite Christmas album, whether it be by the Beach Boys, Mitch Miller, Aimee Mann, Bing Crosby or Zooey Deschanel. And, believe me, it is not rah-rah boosterism, keening charity or the patronizing pride of local product that leads me to point you in the direction of the holiday collections of Halie Loren and Anna Gilbert. These two women have made seasonal albums that can stand up with anything on the shelf, from *White Christmas* to *Sing Along with Mitch*. They are modern classics of the form, delivered by Gilbert and Loren with heart, humor and good vibrations, and polished by performances that will knock your stockings right off the mantle.

There's no reason to get fancy about it: Eugene native Anna Gilbert has the voice of an angel. It's gaspingly beautiful – girlish, vulnerable and sexy as Ronnie Spector, Gilbert is an accomplished but completely ingenuous and unadorned singer; not for her the jumpy vibrato, star-spangled trills or put-on drawls of many of her contemporaries. Gilbert's vocals – whether soft-spoken, thick with emotion or cut short by a rasp – are delivered with a natural immediacy that dials a direct line to your heart.

Simply titled **Anna Gilbert Christmas**, this 2010 holiday album is an exercise in minimalism

and simplicity; perhaps more than any of her albums, this one reveals the whole range of her vocal gifts. Recorded in her parents "bonus room" with one mic and a laptop, this collection of songs are as intimate, spontaneous and collaboratively integrated as an impromptu hootenanny.

Guitar, piano, bass, strings, banjo, mandolin and softly brushed percussion – the sound is at once profound and lighthearted, imbued with a kind of reverence that is anything but overbearing. Traditional spirituals like "O Come All Ye Faithful" and "Away in a Manger" mix seamlessly with holiday staples like "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" and "I'll Be Home for Christmas," and the album ends with a rousing bluegrass rendition of "Go Tell It on the Mountain."

Jazz chanteuse and classic crooner Halie Loren is a Eugene treasure who, in just the past couple of years, has gone global; her singles regularly chart high in Japan, and she's been playing both nationally and overseas these days with dizzying regularity. Husky, honey-sweet, mellow, rich and smoothly capable of orbiting the emotional stratosphere of heartbreak and desire, Loren's voice is that most perfectly honed of instruments – a kind of natural barometer of the blues that is mature beyond its years. Her live performances are not to be missed. The girl has serious chops, and charm to spare.

In 2008, Loren – with her longtime collaborator, pianist Matt Treder – released **Many Times, Many Ways**, a jazz-infused cycle of popular and rare holiday numbers that are rendered with a torchy romanticism that just begs for hot toddies and cedar logs roaring in the fireplace. This is one sexy holiday album, which is not to say profane; let's just say that, were Dean Martin still around, Loren would be a shoe-in for a singing partner on "Baby, It's Cold Outside." Her version of "Santa Baby" is one of the highlights of the record.

Loren, who is also a talented composer and arranger, finds just the right languorous pace for such classics as "The Christmas Song," which she sings with a yearning lilt that turns the song into an invitation. The album also features a number of originals by Treder that fit perfectly among the general warmth of the season's sounds.

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