

## GOING OUT: MUSIC

# Smooth vocals, sultry ambience

BY TONY MONTAGUE

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On the cover of her just-released debut CD *Red Umbrella*, Astrid Sars describes her music as "global-retro/bossa, urban-jazz chill." That's a lot to promise. Fortunately the Netherlands-born chanteuse, alto saxophonist and songwriter delivers. Sars, whose stage name is simply Astrid, is one of the more experienced artists on the local jazz-lounge scene, and her recording is a sophisticated stylistic blend, characterized by tight arrangements, smooth vocals and sultry ambience.

"It took two years to make the album, because it's totally self-funded," says Astrid, interviewed at The Ironworks, Gastown studios that she co-manages. "There were a couple of big pauses when I had to come up with more money. I didn't work with my regular band Indigo, but picked some of my favourite local studio musicians -- Chris Gestrin, Finn Manniche, Randall Stoll, Raphael Geronimo and Kerry Galloway, who co-produced with me. We sat around and created the grooves together until they were just as I wanted."

Three of the tracks were recorded several years ago and remixed, including the funky instrumental *I Dunno Yet*, featuring Astrid's sons Tim and Nathan on baritone sax and trumpet, respectively. Music certainly runs in her family. "My dad was an organist, pianist and choirmaster," says Astrid, "and I sang in the choirs with my sisters. He also listened to a lot of jazz and Brazilian music."

As a girl Astrid studied piano and recorder; she began writing songs in her teens. She didn't start performing, or playing the flute and sax, until after she moved to Vancouver in 1977. For the next 10 years Astrid and saxophonist-composer Ross Barrett divided their time between Canada and Europe, touring in Belgium and Holland especially. "The music we played was art-oriented with a jazz flavour -- along the lines of Nino Rota and Kurt Weill," she says. "I was also in a Sixties-style rock band here. About six years ago I put together Indigo, and we do standards and bluesy-jazz material."

Astrid is a busy musician these days. Last month, besides releasing *Red Umbrella*, she flew to New York and Toronto with Indigo to perform with Big Apple-based poet Leanne Averbach. And with her partner and Ironworks co-manager Cal Drysdale, she's preparing to host two concerts a night for the first time at the Vancouver International Jazz Festival (June 24 to July 3). "The sound [here] is great," she says, "I've played in this space enough to know that."

The décor in the main studio-gallery at Ironworks, a sprawling, three-storey heritage building, brings together art and industry. Bistro-style tables and chairs mingle with remnants of some of the machinery that once made the building hum, and large walls are hung with paintings for sale. It could be in Amsterdam, Montreal or New York -- but it's right beside the Main Street overpass that sweeps over the railway lines to the Port of Vancouver.

"This neighbourhood is so exciting for me," says Astrid, looking out the window in the rear studio at the cranes on the waterfront and the white sails of Canada Place. "I love the diversity -- it's industrial, commercial and residential all at the same time. The blend makes it very bohemian. Our biggest challenge here is the perception the rest of Vancouver has of the Downtown Eastside. To my mind it's a treasure."

The neighbourhood provided the inspiration for *Red Umbrella*'s title track, a medium-paced ballad about how small acts of generosity can transform the way you view the world. Astrid sings it in a breathy voice

that's halfway between Bebel Gilberto and Marlene Dietrich, in an arrangement that has an appropriately urban flavour.

"This a very emotional neighbourhood, and how you see it depends on what mood you're in," she says. "It makes you feel keenly that you're alive, and opens your eyes to things you don't experience in other parts of the city. As a musician who's done a lot of travelling, that's really important to me."

*Astrid Sars's Red Umbrella is available at Zulu Records, 1972 W. 4th Ave., 604-738-3232. The Ironworks hosts art shows and special events at 235 Alexander St., 604-681-5033, or visit <http://www.theironworks.ca>.*

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