

What's the best-known song here?

The title track could contend. In 1978, the Australian powerhouse popsters Little River Band raced up the charts with this yacht-rock paragon, fueled by string-section sentiment, sumptuously layered vocals, a jazzy trumpet break, and a post-disco beat. Elaine Dame loved it then but hears it differently now—as a lithe bossa nova, with redrawn harmonies and a yearning intimacy not heard in the original.

Maybe “Use Me?” In 1972, this gritty Bill Withers anthem rose to become the #2 single in the nation, with its frank offer of sexuality for its own sake—and, of course, that nasty clavinet hook. Elaine and arranger Chris Madsen have kept the hook but played around with the rhythm and the harmonies, the better to frame Neal Alger's guitar. Mostly, though, she's turned the narrative table. “Back when this came out,” she recalls says, “a lot of the sexual stuff was from the male point of view.” Not now.

Perhaps we're overthinking this. The funk-soul classic “Tell Me Something Good,” performed by Chaka Khan and Rufus, blanketed the airwaves in 1974. The restrained tempo and insistent four-four made it sexy back then. But tell the truth: doesn't it sound a little dated now? Well, not when you give it a mambo beat, juice up the tempo, and let trumpeter Victor Garcia lace it with rings of fire.

“I've been listening to 70s music over and over since my high school years,” Elaine says. “I think it's some of the best music ever invented, so incredibly diverse. I could have done three records of these songs.” Maybe she still will. But she is first and foremost a jazz singer, and jazz artistry asks for more than simple cover versions. Elaine has given each of these long-ago earworms a vibrant makeover, all the while retaining the essence that drew her to them in the first place.

In the 70s, the ubiquity of these songs on radio chiseled them into listeners' consciousness. But popular appeal alone didn't keep them on repeat for Elaine these last 40 years. “I have a very deep emotional connection to all of these tunes,” she explains. “I can remember specific days, and even specific times of day, when I heard them for the first time.”

At the time, no one would have considered using them in jazz. The great improvising vocalists worked primarily from the “Great American Songbook,” the omnibus of show tunes and pop songs that had alchemized into gold in the decades after they first appeared. Now that process has lionized songs from the 70s that didn't draw a second glance from jazz people. Like their predecessors, modern singers turn to the songs of their youth to refresh the repertoire.

On *Reminiscing*, Elaine does more than just cover her teenage soundtrack; with a blend of nostalgia and adventure, she claims these songs as her own and adds them to the ever-expanding American Songbook. She isn't the first to do this, but on *Reminiscing*, she shows she's among the best. And she comes at them with the perspective of a woman artist in an era of change.

The female-led band Heart, and especially their mid-70s album *Dreamboat Annie*—which contained “Sing Child”—lit a fire for Elaine: “*It showed me that, OMG, women could rock!*” Here she redirects the flame against the rampant sexism that still exists today. And she knew from the start that she needed to transform Donna Summer’s disco hit “Last Dance” into a straight-ahead ballad. “*At this point in my life, it’s quite a meaningful song. It’s really about that last chapter: ‘Just dance with me one last time.’ It’s about the desperation of wanting love.*”

If I call Elaine a Dame, I note her surname, sure, but I also refer to the figure she cuts. She’s got swagger, a sense of adventure, and plenty of heart, and I’d put her up against any film-noir gumshoe of the last 80 years. She ain’t no shrinking violet, and it all comes out in her voice. Her tone is clarion, big and bold—grabs you by the shoulders and looks you in the eye—yet finely feathered, fingers on your forearm, when the moment demands. Intonation? Doesn’t waver. Her phrasing? Smart and subtle. I haven’t heard her try opera or Tuvan throat singing, but other than that, she can sing just about anything.

She had plenty of time to prepare for *Reminiscing*. “I was actually thinking of this project even when I recorded my last album, *You’re My Thrill*,” she recalls. That was ten years ago. And ten years before that, she made her debut recording, *Comes Love* in 2004. Apparently, like the cicadas that famously showed up in 2024, she operates on a cyclical schedule.

Perhaps a consultation with music scientists is in order. I for one don’t want to wait another decade to hear what she comes up with next.

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