

By Art Edelstein

Arts Correspondent - Published: June 2, 2011

One of the finest singers you've probably never heard — or heard of — is Nikki Matheson. There had been rumors in the local musical scene of a wonderful singer late off a long sojourn in France, who had a recording under way, but it wasn't until we recently received "Invisible Angel" that Matheson's voice finally emerged from the rumor mill. And what a voice it is.

Matheson, from Moretown, has released an album at least a decade in the making. Part was recorded in Paris in the late 1990s at a time when she lived in France and was, among other gigs, a back-up vocalist in the Parisian music scene. After returning stateside with unfinished tapes of songs she recorded when she could find studio time and musicians available, she put a full recording project aside as she pursued performing and teaching French. She currently teaches French at Norwich University. Eventually, as she writes in the liner notes, she met up with engineer, producer and musician Colin McCaffrey, and he encouraged her to complete an album.

Thanks, Colin! This is one album worth waiting a decade or more to hear.

Matheson is a multi-talented performer. She has a wonderful voice, plays piano and clarinet and writes songs with great depth of feeling. Her voice reminded this writer of Judy Collins in the days when she sang "My Father" and "Someday Soon" around 1969. Thus, Matheson has a mix of healthy soprano, with folk and Broadway/jazz overtones. There is also a strong sense of confidence with a side order of vulnerability mixed in.

The program is a mixture of Matheson-penned songs (five in all), two in French, the Hunter-Garcia "To Lay Me Down" sung with Richard Shindell, and the closing "High on a Mountain" by Ola Belle Reed, done gospel style.

There's a lot of ground covered here and in the hands of a less-talented singer this album might feel a bit distracted, but Matheson has a way of making all the cuts mesh into a coherent whole. The overall impression is one of thoughtfulness in the way the music is chosen and arranged.

McCaffrey did a fine job of taking the tapes from France, adding parts that did not appear on the original sessions, and bringing it all together into a seamless recording. One is hard pressed to detect the trans-Atlantic nature of those tracks. The result is 55 minutes of lovely singing and interesting instrumentation with a special nod to the harmonica players Mathieu Fromont and Will Galison for lovely soloing. We also get to hear Tim Cummings on small pipes and whistles and the acoustic bass of Viktor Kraus (yes, Alison's brother) as well as Jeremiah McLane on accordion, Will Patton on resonator tenor guitar and McCaffrey, where needed, on various stringed instruments.

Matheson, who will become a star with the release of this album if she can tour, is Canadian-born but has lived much of her life in the States when not in Europe. She has French Canadian and Scottish blood fueling her eclectic musical tastes and the influence of the 1960s-1970s musical scene including the Mothers of Invention, Laura Nyro, Sandy Denny, Traffic, The Band, The Byrds, the Allman Brothers, The Beatles, Crosby, Stills and Nash, and Sonny Rollins in her background. She was mentored by the late Dave Van Ronk, who encouraged her to hone her instrumental chops and refine her vocal and songwriting skills, and has swapped licks with other up-and-coming musicians of the time like Suzanne Vega, Shawn Colvin and Christine Lavin, before leaving for France.

She co-founded the swing and new acoustic music group Rhythm and Romance and played traditional French and Irish music in The Rentones with fiddler Lisa Gutkin. She also performed with assorted bluegrass, new acoustic and jazz ensembles; among the latter was Swing Street with guitarist Frank Vignola and clarinetist Ken Peplowski.

With so many influences and a long list from a variety of musical gigs under her belt it's no wonder Matheson's album has an indefinable quality to it.

Because she's a busy educator Matheson may not have the time to take to the road to get this album heard. That would be a shame as she is one of the best talents to emerge from Vermont — albeit via Paris and New York — in a long time and she could become a significant talent if "Invisible Angel" gets the airplay it deserves.