

I Can Only Be Me

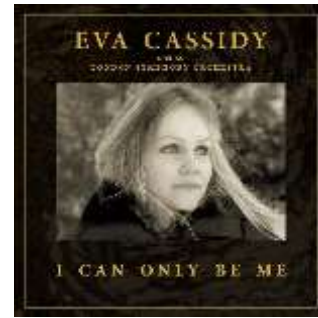
Eva Cassidy with the London Symphony Orchestra

Arrangements by Christopher Willis and William Ross

Album released March 3rd 2023 on Blix Street

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Listen to Songbird [here](#)



“Her voice was magical” Mick Fleetwood

It may be difficult to imagine a connection between the warmth and humanity of singer Eva Cassidy and the technology of cutting-edge innovation in audio restoration. But it is the marriage of those two seemingly different worlds that has helped create one of the most poignant and at times eerily transcendental albums that will be released this year.

“The enduring power of Cassidy’s voice, more than a quarter of a century after the singer’s death, aged just 33, has been one of the music industry’s greatest and most unexpected successes” [The i Newspaper](#)

‘I Can Only Be Me’ is a collaborative work that pares back one of the most cherished voices of the past 40 years and allows London’s oldest symphony orchestra to bathe it in an evocative new light. Taking as its starting point a series of vocals recorded by Cassidy before her death from cancer at the age of 33, the project has encompassed the creative input of composers, instrumentalists and technicians from Old Street to Brighton, Nashville to Pasadena. Their achievement is to bring to an artist who has already struck an emotional chord with millions around the world an entirely fresh reading.

Of the nine tracks in the new collection, one (Autumn Leaves) is from the US arranging/production team of William Ross and Jochem van der Saag (whose combined credits span Barbra Streisand to Michael Bublé to Star Wars) while eight have been arranged by British composer Christopher Willis. Willis is a former PhD student in musicology at the University of Cambridge who left behind his classes in fugue and counterpoint to ‘run away’ to Hollywood. When Tom Norrell at Eva’s label Blix Street heard Willis’ soundtracks for Armando Iannucci’s *The Death of Stalin* (2017) and *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2019), he sensed Willis might be someone who could enhance the reimagining Eva’s music through the prism of a symphony orchestra.

‘She sang such a wide variety,’ says Willis of his gradual engagement with Eva’s work. ‘The slow, melancholic songs, but also up-tempo things that she might have done with a big band and string section.’

The framework around which Willis has layered his compositions is made up of two of Eva’s studio takes, plus performances from her Blues Alley Jazz Club set of January 1996, the year she died. ‘Eva’s original vocal stems are basic live recordings with limited audio data for restoration,’ says engineer Dan Weinberg, who handled the restoration. ‘So we used a multi-stage process, with delicate, almost forensic, editing of sounds — from cymbal bleed to the crockery noise of people eating dinner a few

feet away from Eva. Many hours of rendering retained the quality and character of her performance, losing none of the magic.’

The AI technology involved in isolating Eva’s voice is similar to that used on the recent The Beatles: Get Back documentary and Revolver album reissue. But Willis soon discovered that the process is more organic than it sounds. ‘The phrase AI almost implies that we fed it into a machine, like Metal Micky, and it just came out the other end,’ he says. ‘But there’s a lot of human involvement. It is more art than science — like restoring a painting.’

This was one technical side to the project, and Willis was also able to bring his cinema experience to practical aspects of the new compositions: ‘Eva has a characteristic way of growing very big sometimes, getting very passionate, and then going very small. It’s one of the things that people react to so well. My arrangements had to match very closely what she’s doing, as they do when I’m working on animations and films.’

Yet extraordinary as its technical achievements may be, it is not feats of digital expertise that will captivate listeners to this hauntingly beautiful album. ‘I Can Only Be Me’ creates yet another facet to the story of Eva Cassidy, whose brief life, cruel death and above all whose honesty and vulnerability have touched so many. The almost tangible sense of her presence, which has been at the root of her unparalleled posthumous career, is more vivid and haunting than ever.

For Willis, working so intimately with her legacy, Eva’s spiritual power has been inescapable. ‘She seems to be thinking about the big questions when she’s singing,’ he says. ‘And orchestral arrangements have a tendency to dwell on that. The result is unavoidably transcendental, feeling Eva’s presence from beyond time and space. This effect wasn’t intentional, it happened on its own.’

“Eva’s original Songbird is one of my favourite songs,” says the writer/director Richard Curtis who used the track in the film Love Actually. *“Now it has an equally beautiful, exquisitely different twin.”*

Included in the tracklisting are performances of Christine’ McVie’s [Songbird](#), Curtis Mayfield’s gospel anthem *People Get Ready*, Bill Withers standard *Ain’t No Sunshine* and a strings-section take on Cyndi Lauper’s *Time After Time*. But it is perhaps in lesser-known numbers (the traditional *Waly, Waly*, Buffy Sainte-Marie’s *Tall Trees In Georgia* and the title track, the Stevie Wonder rarity *I Can Only Be Me*) that the meeting of the London Symphony Orchestra and the girl from Bowie, Maryland is at its most hypnotic. With lush soundscapes and pristine vocals in perfect equilibrium — what Willis calls ‘matching the contour of what she did’ — Eva’s artistry and gift for the ethereal attain new heights.

‘You start to really feel that you know Eva,’ he says, ‘because that’s the effect she has on people. And you start feeling protective of her — you don’t want to put something out into the world that doesn’t feel right.’ It’s a feeling shared by the singer’s family, who have given the project more than just a stamp of approval on what Eva’s brother Dan says ‘could be Eva’s finest album yet’.

Time After Time will be released as a single on 2nd February. Had she lived, it would have been Eva’s 60th birthday. To pay for the recording of Live At Blues Alley in 1996, Eva cashed in a small pension from her job at a plant-nursery. Nobody could have imagined that the sounds captured that night

would prove to be the foundation for a superstar career unique in music. Now, with the backing of the London Symphony Orchestra — the most recorded orchestra of all time — that career embarks on a breath-taking new chapter.