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Teaching By Example by Thomas Cunniffe

JANICE BORLA GROUP: "PROMISES TO BURN" (Tall Grass 281)

In addition to being one of the best singers in the Chicago area, [Janice Borla](#) is currently director of vocal jazz at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois. Her newest album, "[Promises to Burn](#)" features her husband, drummer [Jack Mouse](#), and many of the same musicians who performed on Mouse's recent CD, "[Range of Motion](#)"; the front line is held by trumpeter [Art Davis](#) and tenor saxophonist [Scott Robinson](#), with guitarist [John McLean](#), bassist Bob Bowman and Mouse's drums filling out the group. Borla sings complex lines like [Bill Evans](#)' "Funkarello" and [Lennie Tristano](#)'s "Lennie's Pennies" with uncanny accuracy, and her lithe, flexible voice allows her to function as one of the horns. Within the first two tracks, she sings with each of the instruments, seamlessly blending her sound to her accompanists. Borla wrote all of the arrangements, and at times she uses her wordless voice as a solo background. Her scat singing is quite inventive, revealing a deep knowledge of jazz harmony. Not satisfied with the usual mix of bop tunes and standards, Borla has included pieces by contemporary jazz artists [Jack DeJohnette](#), [Joey Calderazzo](#) and [Bob Mintzer](#) to the playlist. And when she does include a standard, she finds unique ways to make it her own. Her version of [Leonard Bernstein](#)'s "Some Other Time" is an elegant dance between voice, tenor and guitar. It is refreshingly free of the historicisms that have marred other performances of the song. The introduction of "You Don't Know What Love Is" sounds like a samba, but Borla foreshortens the phrases so that 16 bars of melody are squeezed into 12 bars. The compressed chord sequence is also used in the solo section, and Robinson, Borla and Bowman seem happy to rise to the challenge. But while the music challenges preconceptions about this music (and vocal jazz in general),

Borla's presentation is quite accessible, and easy to appreciate by any open-minded listeners.

