

JazzNights (70)



We have perhaps too-much ignored the vocal part of jazz - there have been a few whoops and shouts and the occasional whistle from Matt Wilson, but in truth, we have presented few singers. This month we remedy that deficiency with the return of the wonderful vocalist Kendra Shank and three musicians with whom she regularly works, pianist Frank Kimbrough, bassist Dean Johnson, and drummer Tony Moreno.

Francophile Shank spent much of her early professional years in Paris, singing in bistros, cafes, and jazz clubs, She says she discovered jazz there through Billie Holiday records and "lost interest in other music - I just had to do jazz." She returned to the West coast, working with Jay Clayton in Seattle and came to New York permanently in 1997. She has had close relationships with two of the best jazz singers, Shirley Horn and Abby Lincoln, both of whom have influenced and supported her. Ms. Horn hosted her Village Vanguard debut and co-produced "*Afterglow*" Kendra's first CD. Abby Lincoln not only encouraged her singing, but her song writing as well (who better?). This relationship led ultimately to Ms. Shank's latest CD, *A Spirit Free*, a stunning collection of Abby Lincoln songs, to which Ms. Lincoln contributed not only support, but her own sheet music.

Shank's live performances almost always contain one or more Abby

Lincoln tunes, and to my ear, her best work emerges in them. Perhaps that's not surprising; Ms. Lincoln was one of the best song writers in jazz. (Gary Giddins says she was the *only* singer-songwriter in jazz since Fats Waller - some company!). Lincoln's songs are not only musically sophisticated but emotionally deep, and often *very* intense. An anecdote - about ten years ago (probably more, actually), sleeping on a hot summer night with the radio on, I was awakened - wrenched awake - by Abby Lincoln and Savion Glover doing the Lincoln song, "He Used to Dance." I'll never forget it. Kendra Shank is surely the best current interpreter of Lincoln's work. But she does it in a remarkable way. You can hear that it is a Lincoln tune, but Ms. Shank is not imitating her at all - she sings the songs her own way. It is the compositional style that identifies the tune; the vocal work is pure Shank. Even if you know Ms. Lincoln's version of the song, Shank adds much to what we knew already .

Her CDs, too few in number, consistently make "best of the year" lists, and the critics are abundantly enthusiastic about this thoughtful artist. Here's what Nate Chinen has to say about Ms. Shank and *A Spirit Free*:

"It's an eminently successful tribute: respectful, even deferential, but free of the paralyzing symptoms of veneration. More important, it manages to cast new light and shadow on the songs."

On the 3rd, she will bring the members of one of her working groups, the eminent pianist Frank Kimbrough, and the fine bassist and drummer Dean Johnson and Tony Moreno. This group has been together many years now, and you can hear the empathy created by that long collaboration in their music.

I think Mr. Kimbrough is one of the most versatile and brilliant of today's pianists. He is not only a superb leader, but an accompanist of note - always a good sign. Think of some of the great accompanists - Tommy Flanagan, Bruce Barth, and Kenny Barron come quickly to mind - not a bad start to an all-star list! My most memorable time hearing Mr. Kimbrough live was his May, 2006 duet evening with his long-time teacher-associate-hero Paul Bley at Merkin Concert Hall. The review in the New York Times the next day was luminous and the performance made Time Out's list of the best performances of the year. I couldn't agree more; it was spectacular, on-the-edge music. As I've said here (too?) many times, one of the big attractions of this wonderful music is its without-a-net, in-the-moment dangerous aspect. Here's what Kimbrough himself has to say on that subject:

"Music should be a living, breathing thing. Maybe you put yourself into a situation sometimes where you might be terrified. You might be one millimeter from failure. That's alright because in those situations you're very present."

Dean Johnson and Tony Moreno are a frequent associates of both

Kimbrough and Shank. Johnson's musical sensibility was molded by a ten-year association with Gerry Mulligan, and he has performed with many of today's best: Lee Konitz, Wynton Marsalis, Steve Kuhn, Joe Lovano, and Dave Douglas. Moreno was a student of Elvin Jones, has lived and played both in Europe and the US, and currently teaches at both NYU and CCNY. He has appeared on more than 100 recordings.

Recommended CDs:

Kendra Shank

Afterglow, Mapleshade, 02132, 1992

Wish, Jazz Focus, JFCD028, 1998

Reflections, Jazz Focus, JFCD037, 2000 (with Kimbrough, Johnson, and Tony Moreno)

A Spirit Free, Challenge, CR73253, 2007 (with Kimbrough, Johnson, and others)

Mosaic (with Kimbrough, Johnson, Moreno, Billy Drewes and Ben Monder)

New York Conversations (duets with John Stowell)