

Jack Rosenberg Memorial Award

JSO Musician of the Month for June, 2007: Mitzi Zilka

Name: Mitzi Zilka

Instrument: vocalist/lyricist

Early Years/Education: When I was a little girl, my mother tells me I was always singing. When I got older, I asked my parents for singing lessons and somehow through a friend's recommendation I became a student of Mark Forest in Los Angeles. We'd moved from Portland to California when I was twelve. He taught me how to breathe, how to control my voice, he was very, very inspiring.

As soon as I was able to drive I'd drive myself to his house for lessons which involved three freeway changes. Then somehow I was given a Billie Holiday record and was immediately smitten.

I decided I really loved that kind of music and could completely relate to what she was singing about...the pain...the emotion. It was that kind of music I decided I wanted to sing. Then I started going out to hear live jazz. I'd get myself dressed up to look older and since I knew the freeways I'd go down to Newport or over to Santa Monica to hear music.

I remember being really impressed with the Modern Jazz Quartet with Milt Jackson. Then I'd heard about this guy named Miles Davis who was playing over in East LA so I decided to go see him.

I had no idea what he was doing but it fascinated me. I then saw Dizzy Gillespie, Sara Vaughan, Carman McRae, Peggy Lee, etc. Looking back on it I think also seeing all the Fred Astaire movies got me into loving standards. In high school I also played guitar and sang folk tunes, like a lot of people did back then.

One of my first professional experiences singing was when I entered a "battle of the bands" contest in Los Angeles and went all the way to the finals.

I had a horrible moment when I started singing this song on a wrong note and couldn't adjust so I wound up singing the entire song in the wrong key. I think I got booed off stage and I remember walking off back stage and heard these people commenting, "did you hear that girl...she was so awful."

I went to college and majored in business, got married, had kids and left singing alone for awhile. About nine years ago I started singing again. At first I started getting together with one pianist and another and then got together with Peter Boe who encouraged me to go to the jam sessions and build a repertoire.

We started doing a little writing together and he encouraged me to write words to songs and so I wrote lyrics to Lament, Blue Bossa, Ladybird, Pent Up



Mitzi Zilka: Creates a Showcase for singers

House, Little B's Poem, Monk's Mood, and others. What started as a demo project ended up being my first CD.

Educationally, I've studied guitar, piano, and voice privately with Mark Forest, composer/pianist Howlett Smith, and a year at the Sidney Conservatory of Music in Sidney, Australia.

My college degree is in marketing and I have a masters in business.

Teaching: I'm teaching privately and have two levels of workshops at the Pacific Crest Community School on Northeast 29th and Davis. The workshops are on Sundays and include essential skills for singers. I also sponsor master classes once a quarter...on 6/17 Meredith d'Ambrosio is doing a class on a vocal improve technique she calls "paraphrasing".

Singer's Showcase: In 2004 I created a vehicle for jazz singers to hone their craft. Originally, singers developed their skills in a big band setting, a rarity today. So I created a format for myself and other vocalists to perform.

It's called the Portland Jazz Singer's Showcase and it involves me and at least two other vocalists in a variety of settings. I usually pick singers with very different styles to compliment each other like Nancy King, Becky Kilgore, Johnny Martin, etc. So far I've used over 48 singers.

Musical Influences: Dexter Gordon, Dizzy Gillespie, Modern Jazz Quartet, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Wes Montgomery, Billie Holiday, Sara Vaughan, Peggy Lee, Nancy Wilson, Joni Mitchell, Carol King, Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald, Carman McRae, Ernestine Anderson, Karen Allyson, Mary Stallings, Lorez Alexander, Blossom Dearie, Diane Schuur and Australian singers: Michelle Nicole and Emma Pask.

Most Satisfying Experience: Going to The Netherlands to sing with the Amina Figarova Quartet was a high point for me professionally. After that trip I felt I could

handle myself with any pianist or any guitarist you put me with. I don't need to practice with them, I can sit with them and sing all night.

Favorite Recordings: Billie Holiday's "Don't Explain," "I Cover the Waterfront," "He's Funny That Way;" Sara Vaughan's Roulette Years, "Have You Met Miss Jones;" Ernestine Anderson's MY KINDA SWING ("Lazy Afternoon," "Skylark"); Lorez Alexander's TALK ABOUT COZY ("The Best is Yet To Come") Nancy King's DREAMLAND ("Talk To Me," "A Lovely Way To Spend An Evening"); Diane Reeves GOOD NIGHT AND GOOD LUCK ("Gotta Be This or That," "How High the Moon"); Mary Stallings LIVE AT THE VILLAGE VANGUARD ("You're Sensational"); Roberta Gamborini EASY TO LOVE ("Sunnyside of the Street"); Rosemary Clooney with Duke Ellington Orchestra ("Hey Baby"); Tony Bennett/Bill Evans album ("But Beautiful"); The Mills Brothers ("Flat Foot Flugie" and "Paper Doll"); Bill Henderson from THE BEST OF ("Joey" and "Never Will I Marry"); Wes Montgomery's "Billie's Bounce;" Dizzy Gillespie's "I Can't Get Started."

Discography: TWO SUGARS 2001 (produced by pianist Peter Boe) and featuring Dan Balmer, Eddy Wied, Dan Schulte, and Tim Rapp. SOMETHING GOOD 2004 (produced and arranged by pianist Randy Porter) at Heavywood Studios with Reinhardt Melz, John Witala, John Stowell, Mike Horsfall, Dan Balmer, Dick Titterington, and Rob Davis.

Gigs: I have a regular gig at Bumper's Grill and Bar in Fairview, Oregon. On June 2 I'll be there doing a tribute to Blossom Dearie with Mark Simon on piano and Andre St. James on bass. I'll also be at Bumper's on June 1, 15, 16, 29, 30; at Wilf's with Tall Jazz June 8; at The Heathman Hotel on June 23; every other Sunday morning (June 10, 24) at Hannah Bea's on Martin Luther King Blvd. 11am to 1pm with pianist Mike Doolin, we call it "brunch serenade." And with the Portland Jazz Singer's Showcase every "First Thursday" at Jax starting at 7:30. There I'll be teamed up with two other vocalists like Karla Harris, Toni Lincoln, Sandy Denison and more.

Future: I'm currently working on taking the singer's "showcase" to the next step and creating a "Revue." Mark Simon is working on the arrangements and it will feature more vocalists doing scat, vocalese, harmonizing, in duets, trios and solos. We'll be doing this Revue at Jimmy Mak's in November. Eventually, I'd like to have

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enough education for singers; there's lots for jazz instrumentalists but not for singers. Also, I want to go back to Europe to do a larger tour of The Netherlands.

Other: What's the big secret about how to really sing jazz? Why don't people share their knowledge of how to scat and how to really improvise? This is what I want to do for other singers.

-- Interviewed by Rita Rega