

Music review

# Vocalist Elling, pianist Barber wind up a spectacular jazz festival

Weekend headliners place the Portland event firmly among first rank of festivals nationwide

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SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

It was the kind of spell-binding moment that was repeated often at the Portland Jazz Festival, which wrapped up its 10-day run on Sunday.

The moment when music became liquid poetry.

With a flexible, homelike voice, Kurt Elling soared to angelic falsetto, then plunged to hollow depths during his half of a double bill with Patricia Barber on Saturday at the Crystal Ballroom.

Elling, six-time *Downbeat* magazine Male Vocalist of the Year, elongated syllables, bent notes, then repeated them in staccato bursts as he set Theodore Roethke's poem "The Waking" to the music of his quartet. The crowd shouted in delight.

"I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow," he sang. "I learn by going where I have to go." And Elling, like many of the top performers at the fourth annual event, boldly invented the road that would take him there.

The best of the festival produced concerts like this, full of the kind of musical excellence and adventure that inspires joy and even awe.

The largest and most ambitious edition of the event, this

year's downtown smorgasbord of headline concerts, club sets and related educational activities marked the festival's arrival as one of the country's best.

Exceptional performances filled the first weekend, including concerts by legendary Charles Lloyd, Norwegian Trygve Seim's chamber group, and trumpeter Dave Douglas, as well as admirable sets by Branford Marsalis, Geri Allen, and the duo of Gary Burton and Chick Corea, whose ECM album "Crystal Silence" provided the festival's centerpiece.

The second weekend, which featured fewer performers, was topped by Elling and Barber.

A singer and songwriter, Barber sat at the piano and, with body language as expressive as Ray Charles', raised her hands in the air, fingers splayed and writhing, as if miming the intensity of the music.

Her set included standards, though they were never done straight, as well as pieces from her recent album, "Mythologies," a song cycle based on the poetry of Ovid.

Yes, poetry turned liquid again, as her gorgeous piano and powerful lyrics melted into colorful soundscapes painted by her quartet. Swinging from soft to hard-edged, bossa nova to jazz/rock fusion, she filled the room with evocative imagery and drama.

## Discover!

Some of the festival's most energetic performances came at the Discover! concert series staged at Jimmy Mak's, which this weekend presented two accomplished women.

Guitarist, singer and composer Monette Sudler has been immersed in her Philadelphia community since the 1970s, where she's played with avant-garde pioneers as well as smooth jazz sensation Grover Washington Jr. Her strength is rhythm, which she demonstrated Friday in solos punctuated by bright chords interjected into short, single-note lines over displaced accents

— giving her music propulsion and velocity without a barrage of notes.

The barrage came from Amilna Figarova's six-piece group on Saturday, as the three-horn lineup charged into energetic hard bop originals bristling with energy and driven by a crashing drum kit.

And though the brilliant composer and pianist, who lives in the Netherlands, included the dreamy "When Lights Go Down" from her "September Suite" album, and brought up Portland singer Mitzi Zilka for a memorable arrangement of the ballad "Lazy Afternoon," the

hard-hitting, free-blowing passages dominated.

One of the festival's strengths was its international component, which also included a charming set flavored by the rhythm of young Mexican pianist Diego Ramirez Herrera's Mayan heritage. And the Jazz Society of Oregon's "First Jazz" concerts on Sunday included French pianist Jackie Terrason

as well as bassist Glen Moore and saxophonist Donald Harrison.

Despite some letdowns, this year's Portland Jazz Festival had it all — the exotic, the excellent, the dramatic and the beautiful. Liquid poetry, a river of sound.

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