

Jazz SCENE

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Mitzi Zilka formed the singers' group in 2004

'Portland Jazz Singers' created a venue for neglected voices

By Steve Kullowatz

Portland may be best known as a rich proving ground for jazz instrumentalists, but it's also a jazz town loaded with wonderfully talented jazz vocalists. Yet only a few of those voices get to spend much time on stage.

It's common knowledge in this community that there are more worthy jazz musicians than available venues to accommodate them all. So many talents, too few stages!

So who speaks for the jazz vocalist? The answer: Portland Jazz Singers founder Mitzi Zilka. She started PJS in October 2004 as a way to get jazz singers more exposure to audiences and a chance to develop their chops and hone their craft -- live and up close.

Through the years, Portland fans of vocal jazz have been entertained by such beloved artists as Nola Porter (now Nola Bogle), Marianne Mayfield, Patti Hart, Jeannie Hackett, Jean Hoffman, Terri Spencer and "Sweet Baby" James Benton, who have passed the torch on to PJS alumni such as Nancy King, Rebecca Kilgore, Marilyn Keller, Shirley Nanette, John Gilmore, Mary Kadderly, plus dozens more fine vocalists from Portland's deep talent pool.

In the early years of jazz, singers got the opportunity to learn their trade by singing with the popular big bands of the times. This was true for Ella (with Chick Webb's band), Sarah Vaughan (with Earl Hines' band), Carmen McRae



PJS staged its initial Revue series at Newport on New Year's Eve. It featured eight singers pictured above: Linda Daiber, Mitzi Zilka, Barbara Lusch, Tobaj, Linda Michelet, Mike Winkle, Carolyn Joyce, Karla Harris

(with Benny Carter's band), Anita O'Day (with Stan Kenton) and so on. The popularity of big bands has long since faded to a shadow of what it was, but the need for a launching platform for singers is still strong.

This was the impetus behind Zilka forming PJS.

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Jazz Singers group moves its 'Showcase' gig to Jax Bar this month

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The Showcase, which has been a regular feature on Wednesday nights for more than a year at Abou Karim restaurant in downtown Portland, will be moving to Jax Bar & Restaurant, a well-known bastion for fine jazz, located at 826 SW 2nd Avenue.

The Showcase will start at Jax in June, running every Thursday evening from 7:30 to 10pm and featuring Mitzi with two different vocalists and accompaniment (usually the fleet-fingered Mark Simon on keys, with alternating bassists) each week.

Each singer shows off his/her best stuff during a 40-minute set for a 3-set evening of stellar entertainment.

Mitzi is driven to help "up and coming" vocalists find their jazz voice so that they can fulfill their potential.

A number of Showcase vocalists have made marked gains in their comfort, confidence and creativity, showing a positive desire to take risks. Mitzi believes that Carolyn Joyce and Thea Enos are two that particularly stood out, having been with the Showcase from the earliest days.

Zilka loves to see jazz artists grow and excel. To this end, Mitzi, a gifted vocalist and performer herself, has also begun offering workshops to help singers get the chops needed to perform at the Singers Showcase level.

"There isn't enough education dedicated to voice," Mitzi says. Her passion to address this need is easy to see when she starts talking about the subject.

The sessions are held Sundays and information on the weekly workshops and master classes is available at www.mitzizilka.com. Classes are held at the Pacific Crest Community School located at NE 29th and NE Davis St.

In a somewhat inevitable evolution from the Singers Showcase, a Portland Jazz Singers Revue was birthed, featuring the cream of a phenomenal crop of Portland's top jazz headliners.

The initial performance took place in Newport on the Oregon coast last December just before New Year's Eve. The event was held in the Newport Performing Arts Center for an enthusiastic audience of jazzers who decidedly got much more than they anticipated.

The Revue featured a quartet of Portland's top instrumentalists (Mark Simon, piano & music director; Dennis Caiazza, bass; Larry Bard, drums; and David Evans, tenor

saxophone) accompanying eight vocalists - Mitzi, Karla Harris, Carolyn Joyce, Linda Daiber, Linda Michelet, Barbara Lusch, Mike Winkle and Tobaj.

The Revue actually took place over two nights, with a wonderful mix of styles and vocal combinations.

On the opening night, five singers each sang three songs by a single composer/artist of their choice, including Cole Porter, Johnny Mercer, Bobby Troup, Peggy Lee and Harold Arlen. After which, two other vocalists each performed a set of their own with a delightful mix of songs. Both nights were magic from start to finish, and the Revue was launched.

More shows have been scheduled including one at Jax Rooftop venue this summer and Jimmy Mak's in November, with many more ideas on the drawing board.

The Revue will be different with each performance, often featuring different singers, different themes, and different combinations to keep it fresh and exciting.

A recent benefit at The Pacific Crest Community School auditorium featured several trio and ensemble numbers, along with the mainstay solo work, to the delight of fans in attendance. One of those being Thara Memory, musical director of the Pacific Crest Jazz Band, who is quoted as saying "astonishingly entertaining, but watch-out, there may be a genius performance or two."

Besides Zilka, core group vocalists for the review include: Carolyn Joyce, Barbara Lusch, Karla Harris, Tobaj, Sandy Dennison, Linda Daiber, Mike Winkle, and John Gilmore. And it could include, based on availability, Robert Moore, Johnny Martin, Marilyn Keller, Linda Michelet, Nancy Curtin, Toni Lincoln, Brian Dorsey and others.

At this time, there are plans in the works to include another educational element by doing a tour of Oregon high schools in 2007, combining workshops with performances to introduce all the flavors of jazz.

They are looking at several sources of funding for this project, one of which being the Jazz Society of Oregon. PJS is all about education and the chance to bring jazz to the outlying areas of the Northwest is very exciting for Mitzi and her group.

Mitzi has also designed master classes for the serious singer who is interested in augmenting his/her singing and performing skills. These master classes feature renowned jazz vocal instructors such as Nicolas Bearde and Meredith d'Ambrosio who have the know-how to get singers to the next plateau. The talented Ms. D'Ambrosio will be teaching a master class on June 17, focusing on an improvisational vocal technique she has perfected called "paraphrasing." (See advertisement on page 10).

When asked about the future, Mitzi stated a goal of having a school for singers. The focus would be on jazz, but the singing techniques learned would apply well to many other musical genres.

Although this might seem like an overwhelming challenge to some, those who know Mitzi well are already probably wondering what she'll be naming it....thus is the determination of Ms. Zilka.



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