

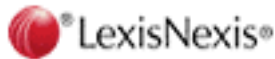
A SOARING TRIBUTE TO THE WOMEN OF JAZZ

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Jazz music is often hailed for its roles in breaking down racial barriers and promoting brotherhood between people of many nations. Sadly, its track record with regard to honoring female artists carries more than a few blemishes. Although the situation has improved over the past few decades, jazz women have yet to achieve respect (and payment) commensurate with their creative abilities.

One of the most significant - and undersung - events recognizing women's contributions to the music celebrated its 22nd anniversary Saturday at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford. The Many Colors of a Woman festival, founded and still presided over by Hartford vocalist Nicki Mathis, has brought female improvisers to the capital city each September since 1987 to share their artistry with audiences in a series of free, multifaceted concerts.

Saturday's performance, while hampered somewhat by the budgetary constraints which many in the arts are currently experiencing, was nonetheless an uplifting celebration of women in jazz. A ten-piece ensemble, dubbed the Afrikan American Jazz New Millenium All Stars by leader Mathis, presented a dozen potent jazz compositions, written - or made famous - by women.

Vocalist Dawn Dumas preceded the group performance with a deeply soulful reading of "Open Up My Heart," a contemporary gospel song. Presumably, the band had not had time to rehearse this chart, so she was accompanied by recorded music - one way in which additional funding could have improved the overall presentation.

The ten-piece band came out swinging with flutist Dotti Anita Taylor's "You've Got It." Taylor, a longtime veteran of Many Colors happenings, also contributed the perky "Au Latin," and delivered several fine solos during Saturday's concert. The latter followed two selections featuring guest pianist Dona Summers Carter, a Hartford-born musician who now works in New York.

Special guest trumpeter Saskia Laroo, who splits residency between Hartford and her native Netherlands, followed with a humorous demonstration of her electronic arsenal of special effects. That led into her crowd-pleasing "Spin," which she defined as "hip hop into bebop." Actually, the funky number sounded more like a 21st-century descendant of Lee Morgan's classic "Sidewinder," with Laroo adding some surreal wah-wah trumpet sounds in apparent homage to Miles Davis.

Pianist Janice Friedman led the All Stars through her more conventional funk blues tune, "Get Set." The piece resonated with an aura of Benny Golson-era Jazz Messengers and featured a wonderful gutbucket tenor spotlight from **Camille Thurman**. Also adding to the energy were trumpeter Ricky Alfonso and drummer Arti Dixson. Yes, Mathis welcomes participation from men during Many Colors of a Woman events; Alfonso and Dixson have become regulars at the annual concerts. Bassist Joe Fonda and alto saxophonist Mark Whitecage, both Connecticut natives and Many Colors veterans, provided fine support as well.

Nicki Mathis took the stage for an effervescent version of her best-known work, "Make Some Kind of Magic." The Texas-born singer has made Hartford her home for many years, but her local performances in recent years have become increasingly rare treats. The evocative love song, "Itapua," which she wrote after visiting Brazil, demonstrated another dimension of her artistry, as did her interpretation of Nina Simone's "Four Women."

One of the evening's high points occurred when trombonist Deborah Weisz, another seasoned Many Colors player, launched into "First Light," a dynamic tune with an irresistible New Orleans-style second line beat. Weisz's gritty, plunger-mute solo elicited a no-holds-barred tenor tirade from **Thurman**, then an equally intense alto statement from Whitecage.

The three-hour festival closed with Stix Hooper's "Never Make Your Move Too Soon," best remembered from vocalist Ernestine Anderson's repertoire. Mathis belted out this foot-stomping blues and gave virtually everyone in

the ensemble an opportunity to solo one last time. Alto clarinetist Rozanne Levine, a Many Colors participant since 1991, took a particularly impassioned turn here. Band members began shouting encouragement for one another's solos, and, for a few magical minutes, the concert hall seemed transformed into a smoky, after-hours nightclub, somewhere on the 52nd Street of bygone years.

This year's Many Colors of a Woman celebration will be reprised with several different musicians and a revised repertoire Saturday, Sept. 26, at 8 p.m. in the Hoffman Auditorium at St. Joseph College, 1678 Asylum Ave., West Hartford. The event is free; for more details, call 860-231-0663.