



philip booth's scribe life

MUSINGS ON MUSIC (JAZZ + MORE), FILM, BOOKS, WRITERS + WRITING, AND POP CULTURE

thursday, january 07, 2010

Florida/New York Singer Whitney James Celebrates Her Debut CD



Rising-star jazz singer **Whitney James**, who splits her time between residences in Tierra Verde (the Tampa Bay area) and Astoria, Queens, has just released a startlingly impressive and mature debut CD, *The Nature of Love*, which also features the playing of acclaimed trumpeter and flugelhorn player Ingrid Jensen.

My feature on Whitney runs Thursday in the *St.*

Petersburg Times' Weekend entertainment section. Click here to link directly to that story.

Or see below for the extended "director's cut" of the piece:

A dance student since age five, and a musical theater enthusiast since the days when she and her sister and neighborhood kids put on shows and charged a dime a seat, singer Whitney James first took the stage at age nine. That's when she played Dorothy in a children's production of "The Wizard of Oz."

The Chicago native, who grew up in the San Francisco Bay area, switched her focus to singing at age 10, when she embarked on classical

listening post,, week of jan. 4

- Ahmad Jamal, "A Quiet Time" (Dreyfus, forthcoming)
- Joe Pass and Niels Henning Osted Pedersen, "Northsea Nights" (Pablo, 1980, vinyl)
- John Ellis & Double-Wide, "Puppet Mischief" (ObliqSound, forthcoming)
- Phish, "Joy" (Jemp, 2009)
- Various Artists, "Kind of Blue Revisited" (HighNote, 2009)

shows of note

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- Critics Circle (St. Petersburg Times)
- Don Capone (drums)
- Down Beat
- Elmore Leonard
- Ernest Hemingway Society
- Film Comment
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vocal lessons with an opera singer.

But the jazz bug bit hard when James was 13, courtesy of her mom, who bought the budding vocalist a pair of cassette tapes by legendary jazz singer Sarah Vaughan and bebop saxophonist Charlie Parker.

"I absolutely fell in love with Sarah Vaughan. I couldn't get enough of her sound," said James, a Tierra Verde resident since relocating to the Tampa Bay area from Seattle in 2007. "The songs were so romantic and the lyrics were beautiful.

"That tape really set me on the jazz path," she said. "You had to be yourself and interpret the lyric, certainly, but you also had to infuse yourself into the song. That way, you can really expand and explore the boundaries of your voice. Charlie took a little longer to grow on me. Sarah Vaughan and Charlie Parker were my gateway drugs to the jazz world, if you will."

James demonstrates her allegiance to the jazz vocal tradition -- she also cites Ella Fitzgerald, Carmen McCrae and Shirley Horn as major influences -- on her just-released debut CD, *The Nature of Love*.

She's joined by New York jazz heavy hitters, including trumpeter and flugelhorn player Ingrid Jensen and a rhythm trio led by pianist Joshua Wolff, on a set of standards including "How Deep is the Ocean" and "The Very Thought of You." The singer also offers smart readings of a challenging Jimmy Rowles ballad, "A Timeless Place (The Peacocks)" and Benny Golson's hard-swinging "Whisper Not."

For her CD-release concert, Friday night at the Palladium in St. Petersburg, James will be backed by Wolff and three stand-out local musicians -- saxophonist Jeremy Powell, bassist Alejandro Arenas and drummer Mark Feinman.

Although continuing to embrace recordings by jazz singers, James eventually rebuilt her jazz-singing concept on the sound of instrumentalists, she said.

"Miles is a huge influence -- his tone and the way he plays is so gorgeous, so transformative," she said. "And I love Bill Evans, and Keith Jarrett, and Dexter Gordon. I had soaked myself in a lot of jazz singers, including Dinah Washington and Etta James. But I made a very conscious effort when I was 17 to stop listening to singers and start listening to horn players and guitar players and piano players."

James continued her music studies at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, where she studied with singer Jay Clayton. She stayed in the Pacific Northwest for 13 years, finding her way to jazz and neo-soul gigs, along with opportunities to record commercial jingles.


Clayton, who served as the CD's artistic consultant, suggested that James ask the Canadian-born Jensen to play on the recording. It made for a rather organic process, as James had worked with pianist Wolff and Jon Wikan, the CD's drummer, around Seattle. And Wikan is married to Jensen. James also has spent much time in New York in recent years, as she and her husband have a second home in Astoria, Queens.

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The New Yorker
The Palladium Theater (St. Petersburg)
Trio Vibe
USF English Department
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James spent one day rehearsing with the rhythm section and a second day with the band joined by Jensen before heading to the Brooklyn studio, where the group recorded live, playing no more than three takes of each tune.

Jensen wound up on five of the CD's nine tracks, and the singer and the trumpeter come off as natural-born foils, particularly on the extended, open-ended conclusions of "Tenderly" and "How Deep is the Ocean."

"The interplay between the voice and the horn is very special," James said. "I wanted someone to feature, as well as to complement what was going to happen vocally. I was very lucky to have her. When you play with players like that, they really bring out the best in you."

posted by philip booth at 12:18 am 

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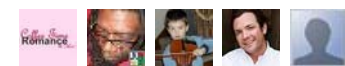
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