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Totally jazzed for her first recording

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A dance student since age 5 and a musical theater enthusiast since the days when she and the neighborhood kids charged a dime for shows, singer Whitney James first took the stage at age 9. 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 area, switched her focus to singing at age 10, when she embarked on classical 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*.

For her CD-release concert Friday night at the Palladium in St. Petersburg, James will be backed by Wolff and three standout 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 (Davis) 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."

For her new CD, 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."