



[CONCERT REVIEWS]

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MADLINE EASTMAN AT THE EARSHOT JAZZ FESTIVAL

JazzTimes / Thomas Conrad / Nov 3, 2008

"She is one of the most technically accomplished and soulful vocalists in jazz."

Madeline Eastman is not usually an afternoon experience. She is every inch a jazz singer, so therefore everything about her is designed for night: her one-on-one relationship to the listener, her moment-to-moment existential aesthetic, her reflective approach to awareness and her relative concept of time. But at the 20th Earshot Jazz Festival in Seattle, Eastman was scheduled for an afternoon concert at the Bellevue Arts Museum. It was a brilliant sunny Sunday (rare and precious in Seattle, especially in October) and yet the crowd spilled over the museum's performance space. Eastman gave everyone who chose her over the weather an early jolt of afternoon energy stronger than a double shot of Seattle espresso.

She has been based in San Francisco for her entire career, which may explain why, even though she is one of the most technically accomplished and soulful vocalists in jazz, she has never broken through into national recognition. Other singers know about Eastman, and come to study with her at places like Stanford University's Jazz Workshop and Jazzcamp West and Monterey Jazz Festival clinics. But teaching is a sideline for her. She plays clubs in the Bay Area like Yoshi's, gets around the West to guest with organizations like the Reno Jazz Orchestra, and plays in Europe more often than Chicago or New York. She will tour Scotland in February. She recently played (and recorded) with Kenny Barron and the 50-piece Metropole Orchestra in Amsterdam. The result will be released next year on her own label, Mad-Kat (a joint venture with another San Francisco singer, Kitty Margolis). Her current Mad-Kat discography includes six titles, from Point of Departure in 1990 to the brand new Can You Hear Me Now?

At the Bellevue Arts Museum she sang many of the songs on her new album, which (unlike her previous recordings) contains mostly material from the Great American Songbook. The familiarity of the tunes made it easier to perceive Eastman's electric chops. She started with "You Say You Care" and smoked it. She rushed it, almost stopped it, bent and released it, and made it her own. The next piece, "Make Someone Happy," was also by Jule Styne, but in a different mood. Eastman's complex voice contains multiple personalities. In her dominant saucy, sassy mode, she can use a slightly nasal twang like a whip. But she can also breathe sweetly in your ear, or bowl you over with the power and purity of her pipes. She can sound like a little girl or like a woman, well traveled and wise. "Make Someone Happy" contained all of the above.

Frank Loesser's "Slow Boat to China" was an unexpected but hip choice. She started by talking it as much as singing it, keeping it slow and tense, Eastman the actress portraying a desire to "get you ... all to myself alone" with quiet megalomania. Then the song subsided in murmuring, obsessive reverie. (As stated earlier, it was strong stuff for mid-afternoon.) "You Are My Sunshine" and "Baubles, Bangles and Beads" were also dramatic recitations set to loose, spontaneous music. For Eastman, all songs are vehicles for blowing. Often she abandons the lyrics and scats. Sometimes she makes up lyrics of her own on the fly. Always, she filters the composer's intention through her own consciousness with her liberties of phrasing and time.

At the Bellevue Art Museum she appeared with one of Seattle's best rhythm sections. Bassist Chuck Deardorf is ubiquitous on the Seattle scene. John Bishop is the thinking man's drummer. Pianist Bill Anschell's harmonic sensitivity and listening skills make him a natural accompanist for singers, although his solos are so lyrically intense that, with a lesser vocalist, he could steal the show. ■

NO TRICKS, JUST PURE VOCAL INVENTION

Los Angeles Times / Don Heckman

"A Consummate, inventive, endlessly entertaining artist at Work."

Maybe there's something in the water in San Francisco. Or maybe there's something magical in the fog that creeps in off the bay.

Or maybe the reason for the surprising number of world-class jazz singers living within easy reach of the Golden Gate Bridge is simply the city's fabled receptivity to artistic exploration. How else to explain the presence of such extraordinary vocal artists as Mark Murphy, Kitty Margolis, Ann Dyer and Madeline Eastman? All talented, all unique, all framed within a common quest for individual expressiveness, they have given San Francisco an important image as a vital incubator for the art of jazz singing.

Eastman, performing Thursday at the Vic in Santa Monica during one of her too-rare visits to the Southland, gave a thoroughly convincing seminar on the basics of jazz singing. Performing with a sterling trio (pianist Tom Garvin, bassist Chris Colangelo and drummer Steve Houghton), singing a set of familiar standards, she made the case for the importance of musicality over vocal trickery, for the fascination of inventiveness over superficiality.

Although she enhanced her set with witty repartee, Eastman was deadly serious with her singing, which often embarked on the sort of musical adventuring more commonly associated with instrumental jazz artists. She did so via improvising that eschewed scat singing in favor of fascinating melodic variations, deconstruction and reconstructing the elements of her songs in utterly new guises. Eastman could swing hard, as she did in a stunning romp through "My Heart Stood Still," and then turn around the find unexpected irony as she did in "Show Me" from "My Fair Lady" and an odd, minor-key rendering of "Get Happy". She was, in other words, a consummate, inventive, endlessly entertaining artist at work. ■

EASTMAN'S VOCAL INSIGHT

Los Angeles Times / Don Heckman

"A prime example of what jazz singing In the 21st century can be."

When it comes to jazz singing, Madeline Eastman is the real deal. There's a confidence in her vocalizing that allows her to explore the gamut of this demanding musical genre. Recalling at times the pure articulation and swing of Carmen McRae, she can also risk the vulnerability of Billie Holiday and the feistiness of Nina Simone.

Eastman's opening set at the Vic in Santa Monica on Thursday was a prime example of what jazz singing in the 21st century can be and too often isn't. The San Francisco-based artist's program was imaginative

and entertaining, her choices from the Great American Songbook including such less-often sung items as "Baubles, Bangles and Beads" (from "Kismet") and Frank Loesser's "Slow Boat to China." She added a simmering bossa nova take on Antonio Carlos Jobim's "So Danco Samba," as well as a witty rendering of Irving Berlin's wickedly humorous "He Ain't Got Rhythm (The Loneliest Man in Town)." Add to that an inventive romp through the Eddie Cantor classic "Bye-Bye Blackbird" and an emotional version of Cy Coleman's "I'm Gonna Laugh You Right Out of My Life."

That's the sort of set list that requires a mature perspective, lyrical sophistication and a wide emotional range. Eastman, working with pianist Randy Porter, bassist Chris Colangelo and drummer Tim Pleasant, displayed all that and more. She also paused between songs to chat with the capacity audience. But the foundation for everything Eastman did — tune selection, her entertaining manner and multilayered interpretations — was her solid musicality. In the tradition of the best jazz singing, she chose not to imitate instruments but to focus her improvisational ideas on melodic paraphrase, briskly swinging accents and the subtle use of tonal variation.

Eastman spends a good portion of her time teaching and giving seminars. The old phrase, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach," in no way applies to her. This is a singer who very much can do. ■

SHE SINGS FOR ADULTS, AND MAKES YOU GLAD TO BE ONE

Chicago Reader / Neil Tesser

"Eastman greater contribution lies in the tough, contemporary edge she brings to her music"

She always swings and she can scat; but while that alone would seem the goal for many singers, Eastman's greater contribution lies in the tough, contemporary edge she brings to her music. Her naturalistic and unsentimental style lends many of her songs an intriguing, ironic distance: I find it a bit discomfiting, and wholly appropriate to the time in which we live. This stance comes from her actual vocal timbre--worldly and tart, with a slightly flattened affect--and from her off-kilter melodic displacements. And her phrasing, with urgent ahead-of-the-beat glides and the down-swooping inflection with which she often ends a phrase, recalls the Chicago saxophone tradition that encompasses Gene Ammons, Von Freeman, and Eddie Harris.

None of this should suggest a lack of passion, because Eastman brings plenty of punch to her music--it's just that she refuses to confuse real-world delights with rose-colored romance. In other words, on even love songs and bebop ditties, she sings for adults; she even makes you glad to be one. ■

VOCALIST BRINGS RARE GIFT TO JAZZ

Boston Herald / Daniel Gewertz

"Eastman has wit and warmth, a rare jazz gift"

Madeline Eastman has lately joined a very exclusive club: modern jazz vocalists with something fresh to say about delivering a lyric.

The lithe San Franciscan singer puts a contemporary spin on vocal jazz, yet it's her attitude that makes her so contemporary, not her technique. Eastman is hip without pretension. She's cool without alienation. She's unsentimental, but never hard.

At Scullers last night, love songs like "My Heart Stood Still" and "Star Eyes" were bopped out with upbeat brashness and a horn-like tone. Her ballads were spare and sultry, even when dealing with corrosive end-of-an-affair gloom "Bilhete."

She's too off-hand and goofy between songs to be thought of as a diva, and she doesn't drench her act in romance. Singing with an agile trio led by pianist Allen Farnham, Eastman ranged from a fleet bebopper based on Sonny Rollins' "Pent-Up House," to the old Gov. Jimmy Davis war-horse "You Are My Sunshine."

"Sunshine" was audacious. Hesitant and way behind the beat, this normally cheery ditty was turned inward and ruminative. It's as if the sunny thoughts are being recalled from a shadowy present. The words "please don't take my sunshine away" become the song's center and the whole thing turns scary and vulnerable.

On "Nothin' But the Blues," Eastman was smack dab on the beat, with an easy sexiness. During a supple bass solo, she chose to scat in a light, funny way: quite a quirky choice, but she pulled it off. Eastman has wit and warmth, a rare jazz gift. ■

SINGER AND CHOIR MAKE JAZZY MAGIC

Collaboration: Madeline & the 50-Voice Oakland Jazz Choir

Contra Costa Times / Wayne Saroyan

"Eastman and friends delivered a magnificent night of music that was well worth the trip"

Sometimes the simplest pleasures in life bring the greatest joys.

Sunday night, after a frantic weekend spent racing from one gig to another - three nights of Grand Opening performances at Yoshi's Nitespot, six hundred different stages at the Black & White Ball, and somehow managing to cook a Mother's Day dinner in the midst of all this musical madness - I sidled over to the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco to give a listen to what jazz singer Madeline Eastman's been up to lately. I've been a big fan of Mad's singing since her Monterey Jazz Festival debut back in 1990. Her reading of the hauntingly beautiful Bill Evans ballad, "Turn Out the Stars," still remains a highlight of that weekend seven years ago.

A few weeks after Mad's Monterey engagement, I discovered that she and I were neighbors up on Potrero Hill in San Francisco, and we've had the chance to hang out from time to time over the years. And it's been nothing short of phenomenal to watch as she's grown and matured as an artist and a singer, stretching the boundaries of her own creative expression while remaining deeply committed to the local jazz community: teaching at the Summer Jazz Camp, running various vocal jazz workshops, booking talent for the lavish Filoli estate concert series on the Peninsula, and running her own record label, Mad-Kat Records, along with fellow San Francisco jazz diva Kitty Margolis. All this, plus designing and managing her own award-winning Web site (www.madelineeastman.com). Just keeping track of Madeline's current adventures can be exhausting; there aren't enough hours in the day. So, with weary feet and a frazzled nervous system, I opted to keep my notebook closed and just settle back to listen at Mad's Sunday night performance with the 50-voice Oakland Jazz Choir, under the graceful direction of Greg Murai. Calm the critical voice inside my head, so to speak, and just enjoy.

For the next 80 minutes or so, I floated along on a silvery cloud of 51 voices and 51 luminous smiles, all totally digging the music they were making together. Lucky for us that there's not a law against so many people on stage having so much fun; all 50 members of the Jazz Choir were bopping in time to the music, beaming with smiles bright enough to illuminate the entire room. This is one happy choir.

After three showcase tunes from the choir, Eastman stepped onto the crowded stage for a glorious, inspirational version of "The Creator Has A Master Plan," undulating with hypnotic, spellbinding rhythms.

Romping through the tongue-twisting turns and tumbles of Thelonious Monk's "I Mean You" (with lyrics

courtesy of scatmaster Jon Hendricks), Eastman strutted her impressive improv chops and her sly, playful onstage persona. Eastman can charm even the stodgiest of audiences with her quirky, offbeat sense of humor and "What Am I Doing Up Here?" kind of goofiness, but she's also one classy lady. Case in point: a sparkling new arrangement of "Calling You," the "Baghdad Cafe" theme that Mad recorded on her first album. Sunday night, she encased the soaring ballad inside a framework of poetic lyrics from the brilliant, eclectic songwriter Tom Waits. You could hear overtones of "Calling You" quietly building among the musicians - pianist Jennifer Clevinger , bassist David Belove , and drummer Dave Rokeach - but the moment of revelation was stunning nonetheless.

Along with arrangements of a Billy Joel tune, "And So It Goes," a handful of Brazilian melodies from the great songwriter Ivan Lins, and a seriously funky take on the Charles Wright and the 103rd Street Rhythm Band classic, "Express Yourself."

Eastman and friends delivered a magnificent night of music that was well worth the trip. ■