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Bistro Bits

BY DAVID FINKLE

The Jazz-Cabaret Continuum

Such a good cabaret booster that she's had her own radio show on the subject for a number of years and now sends it out from WVOF-FM in Fairfield, Conn., under the name "At the Ritz!" Lynn DiMenna says she also intends to appear in the intimate rooms "for as long as I can afford it." The remark, which is one that might have other performers agreeing as they laugh through their tears, is probably closer to the truth of cabaret performing today than anyone will want to admit.

In DiMenna's case, however, the expenses are undoubtedly much higher than for singers glad to have the scratch for a lone accompanist-musical director. DiMenna, who appreciates jazz, surrounds herself with top-notch instrumentalists when, that is, she can round them all up. For a *Danny's Skylight Room* date she tackled on a longer fall run, she called back to the bandstand bassist Linc Milliman, drummer Joe Corsello, vibist Warren Chiasson, guitarist Gene Bertoncini, horn player Harold Zizzo (oh, was that trumpet pure and strong), flutist Monica Attell, and pianist-musical conductor Paul Greenwood.

The effect—as is easy to understand from the list of to-die-for names—was that DiMenna positioned herself as the girl singer in a (small) big band. It's a self-effacing gesture that at times seemed too self-effacing. While ticking off the numbers in "Sweet & Swing," numbers also available on her new CD of the same title, she was less animated, less loose than she could be. Anyway, that was the impression she gave earlier in her set rather than later. Perhaps it was just nerves. Nerves might also be the explanation for her missing a crucial word in her opener, "A Cockeyed Optimist" (Oscar Hammerstein II-Richard Rodgers). No big deal, of course, and once she'd warmed up, she made few missteps. And she did a lovely job on one of songdom's trickiest challenges: the notes in the Duke Ellington-Mitchell Parish-Irving Mills "Sophisticated Lady," that accompany the words "Is that all you really want?" If you don't think they're a hurdle, try clearing them yourself sometime.

The opportunities she gave to her sidemen and sidewoman were various and rewarding and, for a listener anyway, worth whatever she was spending. "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square," the Eric Maschwitz-Manning Sherwin World War II ballad that never ceases to amaze, was enhanced when Attell made like a nightingale on her flute. Nice work all around.

We interrupt this column for important information: Last week, while attending a function having nothing



Lynn DiMenna

to do with cabaret, I ran into National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Dana Gioia. Although neither he nor I were on the premises to talk business, I figured the encounter was too good an opportunity to pass up for a chat about something on my cabaret-oriented mind. It's the annual Jazz Masters Fellowships the NEA confers, which now carry a \$25,000 stipend. Why, I asked Gioia, can't there be an equal citation for cabaret performers, who are doing as much as jazz entertainers to perpetuate music and the Great American Songbook? Gioia's response was affable, but it may not be satisfying to the cabaret community. When I said that cabaret singers are often quite different in style and intent from jazz singers, he replied that he wants the term "jazz vocalist" interpreted broadly to include cabaret and pop singing. (Incidentally, the Jazz Master nod is given to musicians and advocates as well as singers.) That may be, but a glance at the NEA website, where those named since the award's 1982 inception are listed, reveals the only vocalists cited are strongly jazz-oriented. Ella, Sarah, Carmen, Abbey, and one or two others are there, but where are Mabel, Julie, Andrea? When I suggested that many jazz aficionados don't see the definition as loosely as he does, he said my recourse is to file my own nomination. He also said to file more than one, although the website's nominating instructions request that any individual nominate only one artist a year. My suggestion to readers who want to help rectify what strikes me as a bias, no matter how unintentional it might be, is to join me in reading all instructions carefully and then sending nomination letters to: Jazz Masters Fellowships, National Endowment for the Arts, Nancy Hanks Center, 1100 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Room 703, Washington, D.C. 20506-0001.

Watch for the name Spencer Day. And take it from me—you won't need to watch for long. The ingrue-faced lad from out Utah way has a natural music-making affinity. Slotted into *Don't Tell Mama* for a few days a while back, Day mixed and matched music he heard during his growing up in the West with songs he liked from Broadway musicals and such. That grounding meant he sang Marty Robbins' "Devil Woman" and followed it with his favorite "Oklahoma!" (Oscar Hammerstein II-Richard Rodgers) selection, "Out of My Dreams."

Looking and listening to Day, who packed three of his own ditties into the program ("Show Me the Way" sounding like a hit), I thought I was being exposed to the male Norah Jones. (Note to Day's people: record scouts have to be seeking the male Norah Jones, contact them immediately.) By the comparison with the femme phenom, I mean that he sings and plays genuine light jazz as opposed to jazz lite. He's helped immeasurably by cellist-guitarist Yair Evnine, who supplied a number of the exquisite arrangements, and bassist Dan Andrews, so happy with the crowd's reception he continually touched his hand to his heart.

A "Star Search" alumnus (not that he wants to stress it), Day has things to learn about working a room. But he's well within shooting distance of achieving his goal too, as he put it, "embrace the old and bring in the new." □



Spencer Day