

International Review of Music

Live Jazz: Susan Krebs' Jazz Aviary

April 1, 2010

By Don Heckman

Susan Krebs opened her intriguing performance at Vitello's Wednesday night with the provocative thought that birds, humans, whales and a few others are the only creatures that express themselves in musical fashion. And Krebs' Jazz Aviary program – in which she sang, backed by her Soaring Sextet and the recorded sounds of a wide range of aviary artists – was a celebration of the eloquence of bird song, and the inspiration it has provided for composers, poets and performers.



The two act program combined songs – some familiar, some less so – with fragments of information about different bird species and phrases of poetry and thought from the likes of Victor Hugo, Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickenson and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Often, songs were introduced by various bird calls, occasionally with improvised responses from pianist and music director Rich Eames, woodwind player Rob Lockart and guitarist Riner Scivally. At one side of the stage, a large video screen displayed images of the various birds described by Krebs.

It was, in other words, an engaging, mixed-media concept event of the sort one rarely experiences as a jazz presentation. But what brought it all together in such consistently compelling fashion was the charismatic qualities of the Jazz Aviary's central element, Krebs' singing and narrations.

Interpreting music ranging from Great American Songbook standards to the Beatles and traditional material, she brought believability to everything she sang. Among the high points: a spirited rendering of Bernie Hanighen and Johnny Mercer's "Bob White," enhanced by a whimsical arrangement from Krebs and Eames; a view of Hoagy Carmichael and Paul Webster's "Baltimore Oriole" capturing the classic

tune's roving jazz qualities; a stunning take on "Lennon & McCartney's "Blackbird"; a soaring, lyrical reading of Carmichael and Johnny Mercer's "Skylark"; and a blues-driven medley of Hank Williams' "I'm So Lonesome, " Bob Marley's "3 Little Birds" and the traditional "Dink's Blues."

Krebs was well aided by solo passages from Eames, Lockart and Scivally, as well as the consistently sturdy rhythm provided by bassist Ryan McGillicuddy, percussionist Scott Breadman and drummer (and occasional arranger) Jerry Kalaf. And, by the time she brought the uniquely entertaining evening to a close with the 16th century traditional "Song of the Birds," one could only wish that there had been more. In "Jazz Aviary," Krebs has created a rare and mesmerizing creative experience. It deserves a far wider hearing.