

Posted to the web on: 10 April 2008

Jazz

SA HAS a plethora of decent young female singers, but, as this column has noted before, very few of them are jazz singers. Examples range from the obviously disqualified — those with uncertain pitch and no swing — to the borderline cases who might be there if they ever showed any interest in improvising, re-imagining a well-worn song and exploring the multiple ways words and notes can be rephrased to make us hear them afresh.

The ancestry of this kind of singing goes back to the African heritage in jazz and to traditional extended vocalising that made the human voice an instrument producing imaginatively coloured sounds as well as pretty lyrics. And, however pretty their lyrics, that ancestry spices the singing of Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan and escapes to run free in Betty Carter and Sathima.

Its elder mothers also include Sheila Jordan in the US, and Britain's Norma Winstone and Maggie Nichols. Jordan taught Yelena Revishin who, during her tenure at the University of Cape Town, passed the torch on to, among others, Tutu Puoane.

There was a standing ovation for Puoane's set at the recent Cape Town International Jazz Festival. It was led by veteran Siphon Hotstix Mabuse, who has been in the business long enough to recognise quality when he hears it. And although the atmosphere of a live audience is missing, Puoane's album, *Song* (Saphrane, distributed by Jassics), at last available here, brings both that repertoire and that quality to jazz listeners who may have missed Puoane's Cape Town performance.

Song features Puoane's regular Belgium-based quartet, with Ewout Pierreux on piano, Guus Bakker on bass and Jasper van Hulten on drums. Guests are guitarist Geert Hellings, trumpeter Bert Joris and saxophonist Mete Erker (heard here last with Dutch pianist Jeroen van Vliet). The eleven tracks include two songs strongly associated with Sheila Jordan (*That's All* and *You Are My Sunshine*), a Winstone/Van Vliet original — the title track — and other work from her own band and from South African composers Buddy Wells, Carlo Mombelli and our old friend "trad".

Puoane's alto voice doesn't have quite the honeyed smoke in its lower registers of some of her older peers, but it is gorgeously warm across her whole range.

Smoke may come with age — or may not, now that tobacco pollution in nightclubs is banned worldwide. Her diction is superb, a quality vital for some of her material, particularly Joni Mitchell's *A Case of You* and Joris's *For the Time Being*. Good phrasing counts for nothing if we can't hear the words, and understand the choices the singer is making.

She succeeds in making us hear even the standards with new ears.

Where Jordan's You Are My Sunshine was slow and sinister, Puoane's is upbeat and joyous. Where Mombelli's Me the Mango Picker in the original was gently wistful, Puoane's is more urgent and more densely textured . And on Just About Everything, she achieves what she's told journalists is her ambition on every song: she "swings the hell out of it".

Definitely an album of the year and a must-have for your collection.

Music events on the horizon in the next few weeks include the Total Miagi Festival taking place mainly in Cape Town from May 3 to 20.

Miagi (a very worthwhile classical event) has become a shadow of its former self in terms of its inclusion of jazz, new music and previously neglected black composers. On May 8, you'll find a performance of Hans Huyssen's new Ciacona & Tshikona (based on and featuring traditional Venda pipe and percussion music) at Cape Town's City Hall.

On May 17, at the Johannesburg City Hall, there's pianist Isak Roux's The Coming Home Jazz Gospel Cantata, with Sibongile Khumalo, Sibongile Mngoma, Abel Moeng, Robert Brooks and more. For the rest, the festival is dominated by a European 19th century repertoire and enlivened by the presence of United Nations ambassador Maxim Vengerov as patron, performer and teacher.

Gwen Ansell

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