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JAZZY NIGHT WITH THE LADIES

FOUR VOCALISTS UNITE, EACH WITH THEIR OWN DISTINCTIVE VOICE

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Four vocalists unite, each with their own distinctive voice

Article Text:

Times are tough on the Bay Area music scene and gigs are scarce, but four fine female jazz singers are setting aside the competitive spirit and joining forces Saturday night at Santa Clara's Mission City Coffee Roasting Co.

Spearheaded by Sunnyvale-based vocalist Leanne Weatherly, the Ladies of Jazz program features Melissa Dinwiddie, Jennifer Lee and Cathi Walkup. While each artist possesses a distinctive voice, what makes the event unusual for a jazz show is that the women are focusing on original songs rather than American Songbook standards. The novelty for the vocalists is the all-too-rare opportunity to hear each other and hang out.

"Though we're all jazz singers, everyone's got a different style," says Weatherly, an active force in the West Coast Songwriters Association. "That's what make a concert interesting, especially performed in the round. It's not just sharing music with our audience, it's getting together and sharing music with each other."

Walkup is the veteran of the quartet, and too little heard in the South Bay. A savvy songwriter with a gift for socially incisive lyrics, she makes the most of her small range through deftly swinging phrasing and artful use of space.

She's got a long track record of supporting her colleagues, including a popular 2000 release "Quint-Essential" showcasing five vocalists (including Jennifer Lee). While the other jazz ladies will perform with a trio led by pianist Tom Tomasello, Walkup is bringing her own accompanist, pianist/singer Shanna Carlson, with whom she composed and performed the show "Almost Famous, The Musical." Walkup also hosts Bird's Nest, a monthly house concert series at her Oakland condo (the stylish chanteuse Denise Perrier kicks off the new season on Sept. 26).

"It's always really great when you can create opportunity, especially when work is really slim like right now," Walkup says. "It's still competitive. We're all trying to go for the same gigs. But I like the way singers support each other. When I performed in New York recently 90 percent of my audience was other singers who came out."

Lee probably maintains the highest profile of the four singers. Her latest album, 2009's Brazilian-inflected "Quiet Joy," received strong reviews in the national jazz press and features an array of West Coast jazz talent, from the ace Bay Area pianist David Udolf to the world-class San Diego rhythm section of guitarist Peter Sprague, drummer Duncan Moore and bass virtuoso Bob Magnusson.

Lee, who also accompanies herself on guitar and piano, used to be a regular at the Hotel De

Anza's Hedley Club, though recently she's moved to the Fairmont San Jose, playing solo at Pagoda Restaurant's Bamboo Lounge and with her trio in the hotel's main lounge. With her cool, almost vibratoless alto Lee sounds ideally suited for bossa nova, though she can also deliver finger-snapping blues with quiet authority.

While she wasn't familiar with Weatherly and Dinwiddie's work before Saturday's show came together, she's had a chance to check out their music and is eager to see her peers in action.

"We all get so busy," Lee said by phone after a concert in Iowa. "Writing music and preparing for our gigs can be a real solitary thing. I don't have that many opportunities to connect with other women doing what I do, and I've been really inspired by what I hear from them."

Dinwiddie is the most recent arrival on the Bay Area jazz vocal scene, though she brings a lot of creative history to the bandstand. The Mountain View graphic artist studied dance at Juilliard and has worked as a calligraphy specialist since 1995.

Looking for another creative outlet after calligraphy became her vocation, Dinwiddie started studying voice, and eventually took advantage of the Bay Area's vast vocal resources, studying at De Anza College, the Stanford Jazz Workshop and Jazz Camp WEST.

After several years of sitting in regularly with Mark Richards at Cattleman's in Sunnyvale, she started working her own gigs in 2006. Dinwiddie made a strong impression with her first CD, "Online Dating Blues," a sassy session featuring sharply observed originals like "He's Just Not That Into You" and "Married Men."

"Madeline Eastman is probably my strongest influence," says Dinwiddie, who also performs on Aug. 19 at Mountain View's Thursday Night Live concert series, and Aug. 29 at the Palo Alto Festival of the Arts. "She's an incredibly generous person and brilliant creative talent. And Mark Richards is a tremendous mentor. I still sit in on his gigs.

"I've been at this a lot less time than the other women on this program. I'm so excited to be joining them."

Caption:

Photo: Courtesy of Jennifer Lee.

Jennifer Lee used to be a regular performer at the De Anza Hotel. She has moved her act to Fairmont San Jose.

Memo:

LADIES OF JAZZ

With: Leanne Weatherly, Cathi Walkup, Melissa Dinwiddie, Jennifer Lee

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: Mission City Coffee Roasting Co., 2221 The Alameda, Santa Clara

Tickets: \$10, 408-261-2221

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