A new jazz voice, with old roots

VOCALIST CÉCILE MCCLORIN SALVANT WOWS IN HER OWN WAY, AT CAMPBELL HALL

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent

Review

There may or may not have been some sly ulterior agenda last week at UCSB Campbell Hall, when new sensation jazz singer Cécile McLorin Salvant opened her thrilling and distinctive set with the old Irving Berlin chestnut, "Let's Get Lost." The music and the song are means to an end, making for an ideal introduction to the next 90-ish minutes in this room, as she faced the music in her own particular, winsome and winning style, from show tunes to a distinctive original, archival (and deliciously naughty) blues numbers and her personal way of facing the music.

This is a big season for notable vocalists in the Santa Barbara jazz concert season, at UCSB as well as the Lobero Theatre. But Ms. McLorin Salvant's recent local debut, bolstered by the ace backing of pianist Aaron Diehl's sharp and sophisticated trio, heralded something special, a fresh sensation within the jazz vocal arts. Count her among the ranks of debut artists who come out swinging, and with a bold sense of self and archival musical history, right out of the starting gate.

Clearly, Ms. McLorin Salvant is a bold new voice on the jazz scene, with some bone-deep and heart-deep roots, and a few distinctive musical accents to call her own. Florida-born, to a French mother and Haitian father, she spent years in Paris and studied classical music as well as jazz. She won the coveted Thelonious Monk Competition prize in 2010 and released a high-quality, heralded debut album on the Mack Avenue label in 2013, aptly named "Woman Child."

Fast-forward to now and she is all of 25, but with a musical wisdom and sense of both assurance and adventure that earned her best jazz vocalist award in last year's prestigious Down Beat magazine critic's poll, and a cover story, replete with her signature flamboyant colorfully-rimmed glasses. Somehow, the musical elements she draws on — within jazz, and light classical touches and bawdy blues nods, and usually to the right and left of the tradition — have deftly come together to create a special new brand of singer, with links to theatrical expression, early 20th century idioms and, in general, a fresh notion of what is, or can be, to be a jazz singer in the 21st century.

What makes this young dynamo such a fascinating singer is the particular, technically potent and multifaceted, way she approaches the art, bringing to bear her classical training, her theater leanings and a way with jazz swing and love of the vintage beauty of proto-blues heroine Bessie Smith (as in the sassy, shamelessly inuenudo-laden "You've Got to Give Me Some," which only pretend to be about food). For rootsy cred, she also called on the American traditional folk classic "John Henry," a strong track on her album, and it was given a non-traditional spin by the trio's arrangement.

If there was something missing from her Campbell Hall show, it was the French niche of her music, which is nicely represented on her wondrous debut album, and which literally validates her "chanteuse" stripes. It could also be said that, at this tender stage of her musical game, she sometimes lacks in pure emotionality what she so lavishly presents in dramatic and inventive ways. Give her time and life experience, and the balladic wisdom will no doubt develop. For now, she's a musical wonder to behold.

Her version of Burt Bacharach's sophisto-pop gem "Wives and Lovers" was a highlight of the set, with its twisty new arrangement, while she stretched out in a flamboyant, Sarah Vaughan-ish way on "I Didn't Know What Time It Was." A new original tune, slated for her next album, was the most progressive-inclined song of the night, indicating her strengths and creative fires as a songwriter-in-training.

Jazz singers have often had varying relationships with the mother lode of Broadway song, which has so strongly fed the repertoire of jazz standards and the jazz canon of the "Real Book." Ms. McLorin Salvant seems to have devised her own special way of moving around the Great White Way, with jazz cred fully in tow, but also her own subtle touches of theatricality. She gave us a bold taste of her new and distinctive "Broadway the jazz way" approach with her versions of "The Stamford's Lament," from "Cinderella," with the Judy Garland-revisited spin of "The Trolley Song," from "Meet Me in St. Louis," and the instantly anticipatory anthem "Something's Coming," from "West Side Story," to close the set.

The notion of Broadway, done her way, continued in the encore, "On the Street Where You Live," taken from "My Fair Lady," but taken into her own unique expressive place, reaching down for the low notes and bringing her usual painterly quality to her range of vocal inflections.

Clearly one of the more exciting jazz shows in town this season, Ms. McLorin Salvant's coolly triumphant concert delivered on the promise of her reputation, in ways both subtle and assured, dancing across a fascinating blend of influences, styles and eras. Not at all bad for a twentiesomething in the 21st century.