

Crosscurrents and Scuttlebutt

By WILL FRIEDWALD

Sharón Clark

The Metropolitan Room

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Lately, it's been a trend for jazz and cabaret singers to venture beyond the comfort zone of the traditional Great American Songbook and into the enemy camp—i.e., pop and rock songs from 1960 onward. Though not necessarily a bad idea, too many singers fall into the trap of merely "covering," rather than interpreting, jukebox hits. The brilliant Sharón Clark, however, knows how to personalize the songs of Motown or the Beatles, no less than if they were by Gershwin or Rodgers, and offers an object lesson in how to revitalize someone else's vintage hit in such a way that the original artist suddenly becomes the furthest thing from the listener's mind. Her most recent album, "Do It Again," is a wonderful set of songbook standards, but her show at the Metro of songs from her AM radio youth is an absolute triumph.



Sharón Clark

Alan Nahigian

Why do otherwise creative jazz and cabaret singers suddenly become mere wedding-band entertainers when the source material changes from Cole Porter to Smokey Robinson? This is where Sharón Clark excels: Her approach is firmly rooted in the pantheon of jazz singers, particularly Carmen McRae and especially Sarah Vaughan. Like the latter, her natural sound is almost operatic in its richness, but pure jazz in its improvisational sassiness. But when she brings her remarkable instrument to bear on those pop hits of the post-nuclear age, which she clearly loves, she creates something new and amazing. That's not to say she's without precedent. Back in the day, artists such as Vaughan, McRae and Ella Fitzgerald occasionally sang things like "The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game,"

but they tended to sound like they were slumming. Not always, though: When Vaughan delivered a powerful reading of Paul Williams' "Rainy Days and Mondays" on her classic 1973 live album from Japan, it was all the more remarkable for being so unexpected. With her superior musicianship and deep experience, Vaughan outclassed the song's originator, the prodigiously gifted Karen Carpenter, but now Ms. Clark, who apparently grew up assimilating the idioms of both Carpenter and Vaughan, has crafted an interpretation that does justice to them both.

Time after time, when comparing Ms. Clark's renditions with the originals, her reimaginings are superior. She makes a winning speech about how her love of James Taylor is shared by a fellow African-American born in 1961, Barack Obama. She transforms "Tears on My Pillow" from doo-wop into a country soul anthem, à la Ray Charles (like she says, "Love is not a gadget"), with musical director Chris Grasso replicating the licks Brother Ray played on "The Three Bells."

Indeed, the closest thing here to a show tune is "Give a Little Whistle" (from "Pinocchio"), which Ms. Clark makes both jaunty and soulful, with an opportunity (that she doesn't abuse) for scattling rather than whistling. She winds up with "Goodbye Charlie," a 1964 movie theme and a jazz waltz of the kind Marilyn Maye specializes in. She encores with "That Sunday, That Summer," a song that, like Ms. Clark herself, is both wonderful and hitherto neglected. All of which begs an additional question: Why has Sharón Clark been so overlooked, particularly in New York, for all this time? That is surely going to change. After all, what she's got they used to call the blues.