

Review: 4 different voices, styles come together for evening of high-energy jazz

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VH1 may have its Diva series, with a lineup of women from pop, rock and R&B, but it's no match for the Concord Jazz Festival, which played at the Philharmonic Center for the Arts on Tuesday night.

The festival's lineup consisted of Karrin Allyson, Clea Adams, Diane Schuur and newcomer Sara Gazarek.

These women are true divas. They have plenty of attitude and sass, and they know how to turn out a song. And despite the sadness of some blues songs and ballads they performed, the energy was high.

Allyson, whose most recent CDs "In Blue" and the double-Grammy nominated "Ballads — Remembering John Coltrane," received critical acclaim, acted as the show's hostess, opening the show and introducing the other performers.

She's an energetic performer, gesturing and moving to the music as she sings. She opened with a samba-flavored rendition of "Might As Well Be Spring," and her lively performance set the tone for the entire evening.

Allyson performed a couple of tunes from her upcoming CD, "Wild For You": Jimmy Webb's "The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress" and Joni Mitchell's "Help Me."

She and Gazarek joined up for a duet on a Duke Ellington tune, and Gazarek sang a couple on her own, including a medley of "Blackbird / Bye Bye Blackbird," which had a drum solo by Todd Strait at the end.

Gazarek is still in college and joked about missing a class to perform, inquiring if anyone wanted to write a six- to eight-page paper for her about Greek mythology.

She's scheduled to release a debut album on Concord later this year; I suspect the label has teamed her up with these women to have her learn about touring and performing from the pros, get some more stage time, and to introduce her to audiences.

Allyson also sang a duet with Clea Adams during the first half: "Good Morning Heartache."

It's obvious that Allyson won some new fans, as people flocked to the merchandise table at the end of the show, snapping up her CDs.

Pianist Laura Caviani had some impressive solos during the first set, receiving repeated applause.

Adams and Schuur dominated the second half of the show, with Adams taking the piano and belting out a number of tunes, including "Circle of One" and a funky, soulful version of "New York State of Mind" that —amazingly— made you forget the Billy Joel original.

Regrettably, she didn't perform her version of Brenda Russell's "Get Here," which had been such a hit in the early '90s.

Her rich voice reflected her early gospel upbringing.

Unfortunately, the second half seemed too amplified for the venue, especially Denny Embrey's electric guitar playing, which seemed a little shrill at times. It was almost as if the sound balance was set for a rock show rather than a jazz concert.

Schuur closed the show, singing favorites such as "Deedles' Blues," "When October Goes," from her latest CD, "Midnight," and a swinging version of "Besame Mucho."

The Phil crowd, unfortunately, is rarely one for dancing, but word has it that the three other singers were salsa dancing backstage as Schuur performed.

Schuur can swing, she can scat, and she can jive. It's no wonder she's been called The First Lady of Jazz.

Adams came out and did a duet of "Stormy Monday Blues" with Schuur; it was a pleasure to hear these two women trade lines and do a call-and-response. They seemed to bring out the best in each other.

For an encore, all four sang Al Green's "Let's Stay Together," with Schuur and Gazarek and Adams and Allys on teaming up on duets.

It was a rousing finish, with Adams and Allys on breaking into dance together.

These singers all seem to have a genuine affection for each other, and their joy in performing was obvious.

Schuur, especially, displayed a mischievous wit, joking with the crowd.

The evening never lagged. It was glorious to hear these four different voices and styles, and how they sounded when they teamed up with each other for duets and quartets. I just revelled in the beautiful diversity of these women's voices.