

Jazz singers mix in pop tunes during Red Bank show

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Four singers with four distinct styles and approaches to the art of jazz vocals showcased their talents Saturday night at the Count Basie Theatre in Red Bank.

All four singers — Diane Schuur, Karrin Allyson, Sara Gazarek and Oleta Adams — record for the California-based Concord Jazz Records. And while each performer sang at least three tunes, things weren't so scripted as to when they would get onstage together in various couplings. It gave the show an improvised flair, in keeping with the jazz tradition.

Allyson played the role of musical hostess for the evening. She and the others recognized the hall's namesake throughout the concert in their spoken introductions to tunes. Allyson told the crowd, "I spent a lot of time learning about this music in Kansas City, like Count Basie."

Gazarek, a recent graduate of the University of Southern California, caught the crowd's ear with her version of the Great American Songbook classic "The Masquerade Is Over" and her own arrangement of "Never Will I Marry."

"I arranged this song last year in college for my senior recital," she told the audience. "So you might say this arrangement cost \$140,000. So if you don't like the arrangement, you might say you like it anyway, so my mother will be happy."

A high point before the intermission came when Allyson, seated at a piano, was joined by Adams for a stirring duet of John Lennon's classic "Imagine." While even an important pop tune like this might be lost on a straight-ahead jazz audience, the crowd received it warmly, as it did Allyson's renditions of Joni Mitchell's "All I Want" and Melissa Manchester's "I Got Eyes," both from Allyson's current Concord Records release, "Wild for You."

Other highlights in the concert included Adams' take on Billy Joel's "New York State of Mind," rendered while she sat at the piano, and Schuur's delicate version of Johnny Mercer's "When October Goes." When Schuur, a two-time Grammy Award winner, was introduced later during the second set, she opened — appropriately enough — by playing a piano blues from her recording with the Count Basie Orchestra. Her mellower take on "Every Day I Have The Blues," rendered while she sat at the piano, also drew cheers from the crowd. The women were accompanied during their performances by guitarist Rod Fleeman, bassist Scott Steed, drummer Todd Strait and pianist Laura Caviani. For her selections, Adams was accompanied by her husband, drummer John Cushon.

The vocalists ended a well-paced show with two finales. They were onstage together trading vocals on "That's All" and an off-the-cuff version of Al Green's "Let's Stay Together." In performing a variety of blues, Brazilian, Great American Songbook standards and pop tunes, all four singers are doing a fine job of broadening the audience for jazz.