

San Francisco Chronicle

Music review: Melody Gardot and Jimmy Scott

[David Wiegand, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Friday, October 24, 2008

Two singers formed a kind of parentheses of jazz vocalism onstage Wednesday night at Herbst Theatre. Although one is at the start of her career and the other in his sunset years, Melody Gardot and Jimmy Scott have something in common, something that linked their separate performances as part of the 26th annual San Francisco Jazz Festival: Call it the poetry of survival.

Earlier in the evening, Gardot came onstage alone, but walking with a cane, owing to the life-altering injuries she suffered at 19 when she was hit by a car while riding her bike. The accident left her sensitive to light, so she wears tinted lenses in her glasses. But nothing impaired her ability to deliver a breathtaking set of eight songs, most of which came from her superb CD "Worrisome Heart."

Gardot, a mere 23, was both a visual and aural study in contrasts. She was dressed in a simple black dress with black-and-white striped short sleeves, worn over black leggings. But with a symphony of blond hair sweeping over her forehead and down below her shoulders, she looked uncannily like Reese Witherspoon - OK, well, maybe if Elle Woods decided to ditch her legal career for a Greenwich Village jazz joint and it was 1959.

After an a cappella opener, she was joined by Patrick Hughes on trumpet, Ken Pendergast on bass and Chris Staab, in stocking feet, on drums to seduce her audience through her own unique take on such standards as Bill Withers' "Ain't No Sunshine" and Harburg and Arlen's "Over the Rainbow."

But even those who have all but memorized the songs on Gardot's Verve debut CD had to have been blown away by what she did with "Love Me Like a River Does." Some of it had to do with the arrangement, which featured Pendergast making odd theremin-like sounds on his stand-up bass while Gardot infused her sinuous voice with the haunting ache of an empty heart. In fact, the vocals and arrangements on other songs from the album - "Sweet Memory," "Goodnite" and the title song - were filled with surprises and unexpected hooks.

At intermission, a colleague confessed that Gardot had turned his sense of jazz vocals on its ear, and he meant that in a complimentary way. She lists Fitzgerald, Simone and Holiday among her influences, but I can't help hearing Peggy Lee, too - not the Lee of "Is That All There Is" so much as the Lee of "Black Coffee." It's there in Gardot's barely perceptible, softly fluttering vibrato and in the way she pulls back on a note to make you listen more intently. You know, there are those who say the brain is the most important erogenous zone, but with Melody Gardot, you have to figure, it's the voice.