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MUSIC REVIEW

A Voice That Smolders but Still Plays It Cool

By NATE CHINEN

Through much of her hourlong show at the Blender Theater at Gramercy on Thursday night, Melody Gardot weighed vulnerability against seductiveness, without really taking sides. Quiet Fire, one of her slinkier tunes, summed up the situation well. When burning up, Ms. Gardot cooed, before issuing a coy invitation, a pledge of surrender and, in the chorus, this petition: All I want is somebody to love me like I do. The whisper of vanity in that refrain was only slightly less noticeable than its cry of unfulfilled desire.

Smoldering becomes Ms. Gardot, whose voice carries a soft allure even on brighter fare. At the close of her encore, in a sprint through the Tizol-Ellington-Mills standard Caravan, she summoned the composure of a young June Christy. Elsewhere, drawing mainly from her Verve debut album, Worrisome Heart, she basked in heartache. Cracking wise from behind her dark glasses, she gave the impression of a film noir savant with equal sympathies for the femme fatale and the ingénue.

Ms. Gardot has come to her chosen aesthetic from an extraordinary place. Four years ago, as a 19-year-old fashion student in Philadelphia, she was involved in a hit-and-run accident, sustaining serious spinal injuries. (She wears the dark glasses because of her hypersensitivity to light, one of the many symptoms that have persisted since that trauma.) Music aided her rehabilitation: unable to play the piano while convalescing, she took up the guitar and made her first EP, Some Lessons: The Bedroom Sessions.

The drama of that story has naturally propelled much of Ms. Gardot's press coverage, and it probably had something to do with her recent slate of festival bookings. But she made no mention of it in the show, opting even to exclude Some Lessons, a ballad that reflects poignantly on her experience. The audience was left to make its own inferences when she sang something by Ray Charles, Hard Times (No One Knows Better Than I).

She performed that song and a few others, including the Bill Withers classic Ain't No Sunshine, at center stage, sparsely supported by bass and drums. (A trumpeter and a saxophonist thickened the air, but mostly in passing.) She seemed comfortable in this exposed setting, though the music was noticeably richer when she played acoustic guitar, on a smoky reverie like Goodnite. She played one new song — Baby I'm a Fool, basically her take on French chanson — as a solo number, to charming effect.

And when she sat at the piano for a honey-drip ballad called Love Me Like a River Does, everything clicked. Manipulating her voice with special care, she gave some notes a translucent tone and distressed others with gentle tremors. She sounded sensuous and unguarded, and oddly content in her yearning.