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Jazz Etc. / Paul de Barros

Vocalist Janis Mann blossoms into her own

When I first heard the ballad "Too Late Now" on Janis Mann's new album, "Let It Happen" (Pancake Records), I was stunned.

Was this really the apprentice singer I'd been hearing over the past 10 years, working her way through influences from Carole Bayer Sager and Diane Schuur to Carmen McRae and Sarah Vaughan? Or was this a full-blown, mature jazz artist who had suddenly blossomed into her own?

The answer, I'm happy to report, is the latter. Mann's rich, earthy alto and satiny style (with lipstick traces) cuts straight to the emotional core on this album of grown-up love songs. Though she says she's never had a voice lesson, her intonation, phrasing and time are unimpeachable, as well.

"I really feel like I'm at the top of my form," Mann said in a phone interview earlier this week. "I'm very excited about the flexibility and freedom I have with my chops."

A Long Island native who moved to Seattle in 1993 after nearly two decades in Los Angeles, Mann has self-produced four albums since 1997. The previous one, "So Many Stars," paid tribute to Sarah Vaughan.

"I love that full, rich sound Sarah's got, the real depth," said Mann. "But I'm not an imitator, even though her influences have really made a mark on my sound."

She's right. Mann has pushed through her influences into her own realm on this album. Pianist McCoy Tyner's exquisite ballad "You Taught My Heart to Sing," which Mann dedicated to her mother, reveals flashes of her flutey upper range. "Too Close For Comfort" swings joyously, and "You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To" showcases an artful tightrope walk with bassist Doug Miller. The closing tribute to the late Seattle saxophonist Don Lanphere, "Here's To Life," is a tearjerker.

"Let It Happen" was co-arranged by ex-Ray Brown Trio pianist Larry Fuller, whose blues-drenched solos bless many of the cuts.

Mann also received strong support behind the scenes from another of her influences, Seattle vocalist Diane "Deedes" Schuur, who provided financing as well as emotional backup.

"I'll tell you something about Deeds," said Mann. "She doesn't give out the compliments. But when I got the disc to her, she called me up — I don't know where she was, New Zealand or someplace — and she said, 'I'm listening to your album. It really is great. I'd like to take some credit here.'"

Like Schuur, in person Mann sometimes comes across as too eager to please. But this album is indisputable evidence that yet another Seattle jazz singer has wrapped her voice around the real goods.

Mann has several gigs coming up. At 7:30 p.m. tomorrow, she's at the Crossroads Shopping Center, in Bellevue; at 7 p.m. Thursday she plays KPLU's Jazz Under the Stars outdoor series, at Pacific Lutheran University's Mary Baker Russell Music Center Amphitheatre, in Tacoma; at 9 p.m. next Friday and Saturday she's at the plush Fireside Room at Seattle's Sorrento Hotel. All three are free.

Boz Scaggs in town

The flood of interest in jazz on the part of rock singers is annoying, not only because their celebrity earns them so much more money than jazzers, but because most of them can't really sing in that style, anyway.

Make an exception for **Boz Scaggs**, whose standards album "But Beautiful" is attractive, honest and swinging. Scaggs appears at 8 p.m. Tuesday in a jazz-quartet setting at Pier 62/63 (\$32; 206-628-0888, www.onereel.org).

A bonus at the show is San Francisco saxophonist Eric Crystal, who has appeared in Seattle before with drummer Scott Amendola. A soulful sax man with a creative, oblique approach to phrasing and harmony, Crystal gets a lot of solo space on the show.

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



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