



Lizz Wright

Celebrating Music Across the Spectrum—From Lizz Wright to Dick Hyman

Wright is That Rare Exception Whose Musical Diversity is Her Greatest Strength.

BY SANFORD JOSEPHSON

One of the goals of this year's Sarasota Jazz Festival was, in the words of Jazz Club of Sarasota President Ed Linehan, to "broaden the tent and reach new audiences." To do that, the festival couldn't have made a better choice than vocalist Lizz Wright.

Linehan described Wright to me as "not essentially a jazz singer." That's true, but in a good way. When Wright took the stage at the festival's first concert on March 15, it was magical from the very beginning. She is an artist who combines jazz with soul, folk, and a touch of gospel; and she elec-

trified the audience with a repertoire that ranged from Neil Young's "Old Man (Take a Look at My Life)" to "I'm Confessin' That I Love You", the 1930s song popularized by Louis Armstrong, to "Sweet Feeling", a song associated with the soul singer Candi Station that Wright said will be on her next album.

Another goal of this year's festival was to have the headliners bring their own bands, instead of adapting to a local house band. Wright's quartet literally blew the roof off the big top of The Circus Arts Conservatory. From the moment guitarist Adam Levy opened the set, it was clear this band

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was not there merely to accompany Wright but to be part of a spectacular musical performance. Levy, who looks more like a college professor than a musician, has a long connection with Norah Jones having played on her first album, *Come Away With Me* (Blue Note: 2002). He has also performed or recorded with Tracy Chapman, Rosanne Cash, and Allen Toussaint, among others. Levy was joined by the Ray Charles-like keyboardist Kenny Banks, Sr., drummer Ivan Edwards, and bassist Ben Zwerin.

Banks performed at Barack Obama's inauguration and has appeared with artists such as guitarist Earl Klugh, saxophonist Kenny Garrett, and legendary vocalist Aretha Franklin. Edwards studied under drummer Peter Erskine, and Zwerin, a graduate of the Berklee College of Music, was first exposed to jazz while growing up in Paris where his father, trombonist Mike Zwerin, played



From left, Dick Hyman, Diego Figueiredo, Terell Stafford

with such giants as Miles Davis, Eric Dolphy, and Maynard Ferguson.

The New York Times once described Wright's voice as "a smooth dark alto possessed of qualities you might associate with barrel-aged bourbon or butter-soft leather." Not all vocalists can successfully shift from one mood or style to another. But Wright is that rare exception whose musical diversity is her greatest strength.

Wright was preceded onstage by a trio led by one of jazz's young lions, pianist Christian Sands, a protégé of

Billy Taylor. In 2019, Sands succeeded the late Geri Allen as Creative Ambassador to The Erroll Garner Jazz Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to Garner's legacy. He also spent six years as the pianist in bassist Christian McBride's trio and has been called "a jazz pianist of the future" by Wynton Marsalis. When Sands played in McBride's big band at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center's 20th Anniversary Gala in 2017, McBride described him to me as "a very, very special young man. He's the best musician he can be,

always looking to get information from his elders. In a world where young musicians are concentrating on creating something new or gaining Instagram followers, it's refreshing to see someone who has a throwback attitude. I think he's going a long, long way."

In Sarasota, Sands led a trio with his brother, Ryan Sands, on drums and bassist Philip Norris. In addition to playing with Christian, Ryan is currently working as the main drummer for the New York-based improv group, Altus, and leads his own band, the Ryan Sands Trio. Norris grew up in North Carolina. In 2016, he won the Outstanding Soloist Award at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Essentially Ellington high school competition before moving to New York to study at Juilliard. The wide-ranging repertoire included Dave Brubeck's "In Your Own Sweet Way"; Christian Sands' own composition, "Reaching for the Sun", which appeared on his 2017

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Mack Avenue album, *Reach*; and Duke Ellington's "Star-Crossed Lovers".

"Reaching for the Sun", Sands informed the audience, "reminds me that you should always reach for your goals even when they're hard." Ellington's "Star-Crossed Lovers," a composition often used to accompany ballet dancers, was inspired by Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. "Duke Ellington," Sands said, "loved it."

Something new is often accompanied by something familiar. So, even though the festival featured first-timers such as Wright, bassist Marcus Miller, vocalist Kurt Elling, and multi-reedist Paquito D'Rivera, one of the high points still belonged to 96-year-old pianist Dick Hyman, who lives in nearby Venice, FL. This year, Hyman was accompanied by the talented young guitarist Diego Figueiredo. The enthusiastic crowd on March 17 was treated to three tunes by Antonio Carlos Jobim—"Brazil", "Samba

De Uma Noto So" ("One Note Samba"), and "Wave" as well as Jerome Kern's "All the Things You Are", before Hyman launched into a pulsating solo of Ray Noble's "Cherokee", followed by Figueiredo's equally exciting solo of Brazilian composer Zequinha de Abreu's "Tico Tico". In honor of Saint Patrick's Day, Hyman introduced the traditional Irish tune, "Danny Boy", and the duo finished with Ernesto Lecuona's "Malaguena", followed by a rousing standing ovation.

Due to illness ("nothing too serious but enough to prevent them from traveling to Sarasota"), the March 18th opening concert by tenor saxophonist Houston Person and organist Tony Monaco was canceled. However, the festival's Music Director Terell Stafford, who had appeared as a guest with several of the earlier performers, led a quartet of pianist John O'Leary, bassist Cameron Kayne, and drummer Mark Feinman, with



Paquito
D'Rivera

special guest, vocalist Synia Carroll.

On short notice, Stafford put together a sizzling set that included Cole Porter's "I've Got You Under My Skin", Dizzy Gillespie's "Why Do I Love You?", Gene de Paul's "I Remember April" (a tribute to trumpeter Clifford Brown), and Willard Robison's "Old Folks". "I Remember April" was part of the final album made by the Clifford Brown/Max

Roach Quintet, *Clifford Brown and Max Roach at Basin Street* (EmArcy: 1956). "Old Folks", Stafford pointed out, "is a favorite of my six-year-old daughter." It was once performed on the radio by Benny Goodman and Fats Waller and recorded by saxophonists Don Byas and Ben Webster. But it is perhaps known best for the version played by Miles Davis on his 1961 Columbia album, *Someday My Prince*