

Amanda King review: Singer delivers at Rrazz Room

David Wiegand, Chronicle Staff Writer

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The stakes had been raised exponentially by the time young Bay Area singer Amanda King took the stage at the Hotel Nikko's Rrazz Room on Monday night. That's because she'd recently blown away the audience and the New York Times' Stephen Holden at the Mabel Mercer Foundation's New York Cabaret Convention, which is pretty much the World Series of cabaret.

What King proved on Monday is that she has a deliciously supple voice, capable of gliding easily from a thrumming, oaky and often sultry lower register to a delicately melodic upper tier. Bits and pieces of her 90-minute show may have been uneven, and she wasn't always served well by her backup trio, but there's no question Amanda King is a singer worth watching and, more important, worth hearing.

Her Rrazz show was probably a little more high concept than it needed to be. "Forgotten Women, Lost Songs" celebrated music made famous by three women: Mildred Bailey, a great pal and influence on the young Bing Crosby (when he was still singing jazz and before all that bub-bub-bub stuff); Blanche Calloway, a pioneering singer and bandleader and the sister of Cab; and Bea Wain, who had a brief but hit-filled big-band career and is still alive.

On the plus side, it was interesting to learn about these women and to hear some of the more obscure songs associated with them, such as Calloway's sassy "What's a Poor Gal Gonna Do?" or "A Porter's Love Song to a Chambermaid," recorded by Bailey. On the minus side, the concept was occasionally a bit too confining. For every standout, such as the shattering "Black Moonlight," there was either a novelty number, like "No Soap, No Hope Blues," or a familiar standard, like Hoagy Carmichael's "Rocking Chair" done in a fairly unadventurous manner. At one point, King offered a mostly inspired mashup of two songs, "What Is This Thing Called Love" and "One Note Samba," which she termed "a medle" - one song short of a medley. The songs blended well, but were marred by a noisily intrusive drum solo by Surya Nur Patri, who seemed to think he was playing the Carnival music from "Black Orpheus."

The trio, including Shota Osabe on piano and Chuck Bennett on bass, often seemed somewhat detached from King. There's a rule somewhere that every member of a backup group has to have a solo, but in the cases of both Bennett's and Nur Patri's offerings, the spotlight cutaways seemed more pro forma than integral to any real arrangement.

OK, now this is going to sound really unfair, but it must be said: When you listen to this group working with King, you can't help wondering what a Mike Greensill or a George Mesterhazy might do with this gifted young singer. Should you be a total stranger to the Bay Area cabaret world, they are the pianist-arrangers, respectively, for Wesla Whitfield and Paula West. Granted, you could probably hum through a kazoo and those two ladies would still blow the roof off the Rrazz Room (and have, many times, sans kazoo), but the point is that an arranger and backup group have to find that perfect sonic marriage with a singer. It's not just about playing the notes: It's about blending the instrumentation with the vocals in at least a seamless, if not creative, way.

One arrangement stood out as a wrong choice, and that was the jaunty take on Carmichael's paragon of plaintive longing, "Skylark." It was fun to listen to, up to a point, simply because King's voice is so compelling. But, at heart, it represented for this listener a disconnect from what the song is about. Yes, you can mess around with the tempo of any song, but, for my money, you still need to tell its story faithfully. "Skylark" is about yearning: Ramping it up like "The Trolley Song" didn't entirely work. The arrangement for "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" was also clamorous and felt more as if it were meant to be performed at karaoke night at a strip club.

King is unquestionably an emerging star. Her instrument is both special and often irresistible. As she goes on to make her mark in the music world - and she is definitely doing that - she needs to connect consistently with the stories she is singing. When she did that on Monday night, she made believers of us all. I, for one, want to hear more.

E-mail David Wiegand at dwiegand@sfnchronicle.com.

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