

# Kendra Shank

by Jazz Improv Staff

**JJ:** Could you touch on your background in Seattle, WA, and who or what inspired you to want to begin serious study and career in jazz?

**KS:** My early career as a folk musician mostly evolved in Seattle from 1980 – 1988 (although it had its beginnings in Paris, 1977). I performed in folk clubs, festivals, and colleges – as a solo singer/guitarist and also in a duo with a banjoist/guitarist. My music was focused on folk, folk/pop, country, bluegrass and French chanson. In 1982 I started listening to jazz (starting with Billie Holiday, Zoot Sims, Joe Pass, Paul Desmond, Sarah Vaughan) and went to Bud Shank's jazz workshop (where I heard Betty Carter for the first time). I added a few jazz standards to my folk repertoire and, in 1987-88, did a couple of gigs with a jazz rhythm section – but it wasn't until I met Jay Clayton in 1989 that I began seriously studying jazz. I had just returned to Seattle after 5 months in Paris where I had immersed myself in the jazz scene, listening to live music most nights and sitting in a little bit. I had become completely impassioned with jazz and decided I wanted to be a jazz singer. Bassist Ed Schuller, whom I met in Paris, suggested I study with Jay Clayton, so I returned to Seattle to do so (she was teaching at Cornish College of the Arts at that time). The Seattle jazz scene provided a rich environment for me to grow as a jazz musician, and I collaborated with some wonderful musicians there including Jeff Johnson, Hans Teuber, John Hansen, Dean Hodges, and many others.

**JJ:** Could you cite one or more things from your studies with Jay Clayton and your association with Shirley Horn respectively, that have significantly impacted your artistry.

**KS:** Jay Clayton is the one who really put me on the path of exploring the art of jazz – she opened a whole world to me, and is one of my most important musical influences. She was my first jazz teacher and mentor (I began studying with her in 1989), and the first to show me what being a jazz musician is. In addition to giving me a foundation in the basic skills of jazz singing, starting with the standards, I'm also grateful to her for introducing me to free improvisation very early on, as this instilled in me a desire to explore the music creatively and openly – to take risks and seek my own voice in the music. Studying improvisation with Jay, and performing her original music with her on a few occasions, have given my music a direction I otherwise might never have found, and I know that I wouldn't be the musician I am if not for her. She

taught me that expressing truth in the music is paramount and that it's about telling your story (*Sing Your Story* is the title of her book). Jay Clayton is one of the few true innovators in this music, and her artistic vision is an inspiration. She continues to inspire me to stretch myself and to explore the limitless world of sounds and expression of which the voice is capable.

Shirley Horn also had a big impact on me early in my jazz development, and was an important mentor. I was deeply influenced and inspired by her music – the slow ballad tempos, her use of space, her ability to convey a lyric with authenticity, her emotional immediacy yet subtle shadings, her atmosphere of intimacy, her dynamics. Her music taught me about space – using silence as a color, as a “note” to play (Jay Clayton also showed me this). Her silences were so full of intention, presence and impact. Shirley encouraged me in my musical development and was responsible for two pivotal events in my career: my recording debut (she recommended me to Mapleshade Records and co-produced my debut album, *Afterglow*) and my New York debut (she invited me to perform a short showcase set during her engagement at the Village Vanguard in 1992). She also introduced me to pianist Frank Kimbrough (he played with me on the Vanguard showcase), who has long been one of my most important collaborators and who introduced me to the other members of my current band.

**JJ:** Please talk about your time in Paris and how that has influenced your musicianship, creativity and your outlook.

**KS:** Paris has been a second home to me, and my connection to French language and culture began when I was 15 years old, so it

has been an essential part of my evolution. Busking in Parisian subways and street cafes when I was 19 (as a solo folk singer/guitarist) was where my music career began. My adopted French “father” (I lived with a French family for a short time) played me old 78s of Billie Holiday and Teddy Wilson which was of my early introductions to jazz. Later, in 1988, I was living in Paris (with my French “sister”) when I decided to focus my music on jazz and started sitting in at jazz clubs there. Over the next 6 years I had dual residency in Seattle and Paris – studying with Jay Clayton in Seattle (thanks to a suggestion by bassist Ed Schuller, whom I met in Paris), and gigging in both cities, splitting each year between them. Paris had a vibrant jazz scene then with lots of opportunities to play, so I was able to really work on my craft, hear a lot of live music, and learn from some great musicians



like Alain Jean-Marie, Laurent de Wilde, Jack Gregg, Mark Thompson, Bernard Maury, Henri Renaud, and many others. I met bassist Red Mitchell there, who inspired and encouraged me (and gave me some of his original songs to sing). Radio journalist Maurice Cullaz, an icon on the Paris scene, was very supportive and produced me in concert on Radio France (French national radio) with a stellar French rhythm section: Alain Jean-Marie (piano), Jean Bardy (bass), Philippe Soirat (drums). I toured France with this same group, performing in festivals and concert halls. It was a very exciting time for me and a period of accelerated growth as I threw myself completely into jazz music. France provided me more opportunities to perform – and at a higher level of venue (festivals, concert halls) – than did Seattle/the U.S. during those years (1989 – 1994). The French seemed to embrace the arts as an essential part of humanity and life, which was validating and encouraging.

**JJ:** Six years have passed since your last CD. Please talk about your evolution during that time and about how your new CD, *A Spirit Free: Abbey Lincoln Songbook* (Challenge Records), evolved.

**KS:** After my *Reflections* CD, I felt at a sort of crossroads musically and began looking for new input and new avenues for growth. I took a workshop with vocal improviser Rhiannon in 2001 which gave me the challenge I was looking for and opened me up to some new sounds and

approaches and new ways to explore my music. This led to a capella collaborations with vocalist Kyoko Kitamura, seeing what we could create with just two voices (and on a couple of occasions, adding percussion). This, and further workshops with Rhiannon over the next few years, freed me up and gave me added strength and independence as a musician. Also during this time, my first mentor and teacher, Jay Clayton, moved back to New York and invited me on a performance of her music for 4 voices which was challenging and inspiring, as are her workshops. I began to integrate what I was learning through a *capella* vocal improvisation into my music with my quartet (Frank Kimbrough, Dean Johnson, Tony Moreno), some of which can be heard on *A Spirit Free*. In the years since our last CD, the quartet's sound has continued to evolve as a group, as we've played together regularly and done some touring.

In spring of 2002, Gary Giddins suggested that I record an Abbey Lincoln songbook album. It had been in the back of my mind that I would someday do this, since I love Abbey and her songs and she has been a profound inspiration and musical influence, but Gary's suggestion was the catalyst for deciding to do it now. Abbey Lincoln is one of the great songwriters, and I believe her songs will become standards (some of them have already been recorded by other vocalists: Sheila Jordan, Cassandra Wilson, Mark Murphy, Freddy Cole, to name just a few). I began adding Abbey's songs to my repertoire in 1994, and recorded some of them on my pre-

vious albums: "Should've Been" and "Angel Face" on my *Wish* CD (1998), and "Throw it Away" on my *Reflections* CD (2000). Over the years, I've found that more and more, the topics that Abbey writes about, her words and melodies seem to resonate with me more than any other songs. For me, they are songs of healing, hope, freedom, strength, wisdom. I relate to their philosophical content, narrative directness, and the universal truths they tell about the human condition and what it is to live in this world – the beauty of the human spirit and its ability to overcome adversity. Since I wanted to pay tribute to Abbey Lincoln as a composer, I focused on songs for which she had written both music and words. My longtime co-producer, Andy Rowan (he also co-produced my last 2 albums), is the one who brought "Natas" to my attention and suggested I include it on the project. The album title, *A Spirit Free*, is a phrase from Abbey's lyrics in two of the songs on this CD: "Down Here Below" and "The Music is the Magic." For me, it epitomizes Abbey Lincoln and her art, as well as describing my view on life and music.

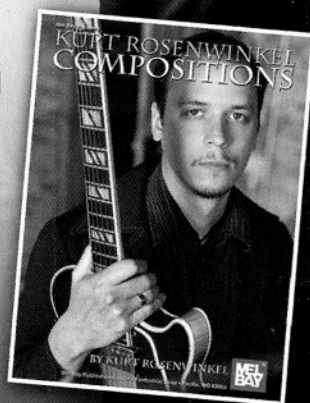
Once it was decided we would do the project, I began exploratory sessions with the core band: pianist Frank Kimbrough, bassist Dean Johnson, drummer Tony Moreno – we've been playing together for eight years and recorded my last CD together. We'd get together and play through the songs, sometimes starting with an arrangement idea I had, and then ultimately letting the arrangement unfold organically as we played around with it and various band members

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gave input. For example, on *Wholly Earth*, I felt that the form of the tune would lend itself well to being treated like two different "movements." The first movement would be in extended long-meter over a double-feel bass pedal point with the chords and melody floating over the top, to express the lyric's imagery of flying over the earth, looking down at the landscapes below. The second movement would be a grooving, swinging samba, to express the circular, "whole wide world is round" imagery and the rhythm of the earth spinning on its axis. Frank suggested the addition of an 8-bar vamp section to further define the transition from the first movement to the second, and also added it to the end of the second movement as part of the form. The arrangements continued to evolve on our gigs over a 3-year period, as we inhabited this music and allowed it to unfold. When we finally recorded it in Jan. 2005, it still felt fresh, since we have an open, anything-can-happen approach (and because we were so familiar with the music, we could really fly free with it).

This CD was so much fun to make. It was the best time I've ever had in the studio. It's such a joy to play with these amazing musicians; it's like riding a wave – the music can go anywhere, we never know what's going to happen. It was playful, free, spontaneous and exciting. Like having a conversation with great friends; there's a deep connection. I don't approach the music as a singer fronting a band, but, rather, as one musician in a collaborative ensemble where the music unfolds organically, and the arrangements are kept open and fluid, to allow for spontaneous group interplay and the free expression of each band member. For example, on "Music is the Magic," the 5/4 ostinato that I play on kalimba (African thumb piano) provides a simple motif upon which the band can add unlimited colorations. Our approach is often polyphonic – multilayered sound where everyone is interacting at once, rather than one instrument in the foreground while everyone else plays a supportive role (although we are, at all times, supporting one another and listening to one another). This requires a high level of trust and intuition, and I'm grateful to my band mates for bringing that. Each member's musical personality contributes to the sound of the group as a whole: for example, Frank's harmonic concept and spaciousness, Tony's polyrhythms and textural coloration, Dean's interweaving lines, my over-the-

bar phrasing.

Our special guests for this project fit right into the chemistry. Billy Drewes has played several gigs with us and connected instantly with the ensemble. His sound on reeds is so distinct and expressive – just what I was looking for – and his unusual percussion sounds on "Throw it Away" (I think he was playing on pots and pans) were perfect for that arrangement. He and Tony both have an empathetic ability to interact with my phrasing (actually, I could say this about the whole band). Ben Monder, with whom I've played occasionally over the years, is also a perfect fit. As with all musicians I choose to play with, he has a very distinctive sound, and I especially love the watercolor "wash" that he provides on "Music is the Magic" and "Wholly Earth." He also adds to the country flavor of "World is Falling Down" (I had originally envisioned pedal steel for this song, but instead asked Ben to approximate that color). Gary Versace has played numerous gigs with me on piano, so the chemistry was already there, but this was the first time on accordion, and I love what his sound brought to "Down Here Below." I had imagined approaching the tune like the old British Isles ballads I sang in my early years as a folk singer/guitarist – I kept hearing in my head the lonely sound of a concertina. Gary created that vibe beautifully on accordion, and I love his humor and playfulness on "Natas." All of my musical influences and roots came into play in making this CD: jazz, folk, world, country, French chanson. The intense and wonderful journey of delving deeply into these songs took me to some surprising places within myself, from which new sounds and colors emerged. I'm deeply grateful to Abbey Lincoln for bringing her brilliant songs to the world, and I'm honored to sing them.

**JJ:** What individuals (authors, artists, philosophers, etc.) have provided inspiration for you, or what philosophies, or words of wisdom have you read or heard that have become foundational understandings for the way you live?

**KS:** Abbey Lincoln's songs have been a spiritual guide for me in my life – the philosophies and wisdom they express have uplifted me and helped me through dark times, and Abbey has been a source of inspiration and support. All of my mentors have inspired me and given words of wisdom. Author and spiritual teacher Sylvia Bennett has provided my primary spiritual foundation and guidance for living since 1996, when I began studying her course in transformation called *Real Magic*. The meditation practices I learned from Sylvia are part of my daily ritual, and she now has a book entitled *Magic: The Simple Truth (Alchemy for Today's World – The Real Magic Course)*. Some other books and authors that have inspired me or provided guidance are: *Tao Te Ching* by Lao-tzu (translation by Stephen Mitchell), *Free Play: The Power of Improvisation in Life and the Arts* by Stephen Nachmanovitch, *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* by Eckhart Tolle, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki, and

the poems of Rumi as translated by Coleman Barks. I keep an on-going collection of quotes that inspire me, and some of those are by: Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., Eleanor Roosevelt, Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt, Ted Shank (my father, an award-winning playwright), White Eagle, Thelonious Monk. Words of wisdom and inspiration have also come from family, friends and colleagues.

**JJ:** How do you stay balanced, and nurture deeper meaningful ideas and feelings in this contemporary society which is replete with sensory overload, and the nervous drive for instant gratification, instant everything.

**KS:** Playing music is balancing, nurturing, grounding and feeds my soul. Whenever I'm feeling lost, singing or playing the guitar will always bring me back. *The Real Magic* pathwork and meditation practices I previously mentioned focus and ground me, as does Network Spinal Analysis – a healing modality that involves focusing energy and breath. I'm learning more and more the importance of breath – how it connects and grounds you and how you can use it to focus energy and balance yourself. And, being a singer, there's the added dimension of how breath is used to produce sound. Swimming laps helps balance me. Surrounding myself with like-minded people who remind me what's really important in life (and what's not), and who are on a similar path helps me find balance. I'm blessed with family and friends who are supportive and loving. I'm fond of solitude, and spend a lot of quiet time with myself. I don't tolerate constant input and stimulation very well, so perhaps by my very nature I'm not inclined to get caught up in sensory overload (for example, I'm not a person who has the TV running all the time, even if I'm not watching it. For many years I didn't even own a TV). I like quiet – I don't play music in the background when I'm doing other activities – if music is on, I give it my full attention. My favorite way to listen to music is live – I like to sit up close to the band and feel the energy. Exchanging ideas and experiences with friends – talking about music, life, philosophy, or just laughing – is nurturing for me.

**JJ:** If there is one for you, what is the connection between music and spirituality?

**KS:** For me, music is the expression of spirit, and the two are inseparable. My music practice and spiritual practice are intertwined. They're both about truth, love, healing, self-discovery, self-expression, transformation, walking a path, focusing energy, communion. Being in the moment. That's what I love about improvisation – it takes you there. I love the creative process of improvising with a group of musicians – the community that is formed in that moment of making music together, where the whole is bigger than the sum of the parts and the energies converge. When the music is playing you, rather than you playing the music.

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"Even if  
our efforts of  
attention seem for years  
to be producing no result,  
one day a light that is in  
exact proportion to them  
will flood the soul."

- Simone Weil