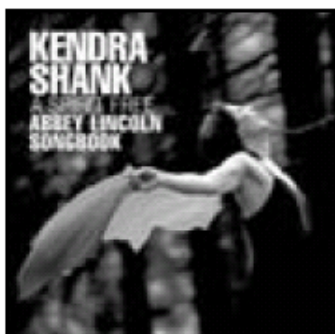


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A Spirit Free (Abbey Lincoln Songbook)

Kendra Shank (Challenge)

by Joel Roberts

An album devoted to Abbey Lincoln's glorious compositions is such an obvious and appealing idea it's a wonder it's taken so long for someone to do it. For decades, Lincoln has written one gorgeous song after another, imbued with passion, emotion and her wise lyrical observations on life, love and loss. Yet while almost every major and minor figure in jazz has been the subject of a "tribute" album, Ms. Lincoln's was nowhere to be found. Until now, that is.

Kudos then to the fine New York singer Kendra Shank, a friend and disciple of Lincoln's, for finally taking on the challenge of recording an "Abbey Lincoln Songbook" - and a challenge it is, given how difficult and idiosyncratic Lincoln's tunes can be. But Shank, a former folksinger who shares some of Lincoln's theatrical intensity, knocks the 11 songs on *A Spirit Free* out of the park, capturing the essence of these deeply personal tunes without attempting the losing proposition of imitating Lincoln's wholly inimitable approach.

With fine, spare backing from a group featuring pianist Frank Kimbrough, saxophonist Billy Drewes, guitarist Ben Monder and accordionist Gary Versace, among others, Shank makes some of Lincoln's best-known compositions her own. She squeezes all the melancholy drama out of the haunting torch song "Down Here Below" and treats "The World Is Falling Down" as a sort of Tom Waits-meets-circus-big-top theme. This will surely show up on many best vocal albums lists at the end of the year and will hopefully shine more light on the artistry of both Shank and Lincoln.

For more information, visit www.challenge.nl. Shank is at Jazz Standard Mar. 13th. See calendar.