

Critics' Choice: New CDs

Kendra Shank

"A Spirit Free: Abbey Lincoln Songbook"
(Challenge)

Abbey Lincoln's songs can feel mystical or commonsensical, confidential or universal. The thread running through them has always been Ms. Lincoln's voice, an instrument of complex shading and deep projection. That's one reason why so few singers have attempted their own interpretations of her music, which is often (here's another reason) a lot more slippery and subversive than it sounds.

"A Spirit Free," the new album by the jazz singer Kendra Shank, was made with Ms. Lincoln's blessing, and with some of her sheet music. It's an eminently successful tribute: respectful, even deferential, but free of the paralyzing symptoms of veneration. More important, it manages to cast new light and shadow on the songs.

Ms. Shank, an emotionally forthright singer, brings care and confidence to her performance; she's using everything in her arsenal, including the lessons of a youthful stint as an acoustic folk singer. She sounds equally at home with the worldly ache of "Down Here Below" and the percussive clangor of "Throw It Away." Her arrangements, smartly varied, make the most of an excellent backing ensemble.

Her rapport with that ensemble — especially longtime partners like the pianist Frank Kimbrough, the bassist Dean Johnson and the drummer Tony Moreno — is what gives the album its effervescence. What gives it depth, naturally, is the material, which Ms. Shank plumbs with a degree of integrity worthy of its source.

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