

## Pure Tones, Deep Meanings Kendra Shank Deserves Some Prime Time

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June 4 - 10, 2003 New York City



Kendra Shank (photo: Sylvia Plachy)

The world of jazz singing involves a lot of trends. At the start of the '90s, the main idea was to show as much emotion (real or otherwise) and make as much noise as possible, and the woman the mainstream press hailed as the latest thing was screechy Dianne Schurr. A few years later, the pendulum had swung the other way, and by the end of the Clinton era everybody was trying to be like Diana Krall: cool and emotionally restrained. From Dianne to Diana, the trend may have changed, but the lure of trends is as strong as ever.

Try as I may, I can't fit Kendra Shank into any kind of a trend, though I can point to other examples of her career trajectory from folk music to jazz. There's the late Nina Simone, who first mixed jazz with folk and world music not long after Kendra was born, and, more contemporarily, Kate McGarry, who includes Irish folk songs in her act, and Diane Hubka, who, like Shank, sings jazz in a soft, folkish voice and accompanies herself on guitar. But I'm stretching. Kendra consistently names Abbey Lincoln and Shirley Horn as her most important living influences, but hard as I listen I can't find that many similarities, sonic or otherwise. Shank doesn't often

follow Lincoln's example of writing her own songs (amen to that—jazz singers besides Lincoln shouldn't be encouraged in that direction), but Shank does sing a lot of Lincoln's songs, and hallelujah for that.

The only conclusion I can come up with is that Kendra is Kendra, and there's no one else quite like her. She has that soft, sweet sound that I associate with the best in folk singing, but with the stronger intonation, dynamics, and more varied tonal colors that are unique to jazz. And she swings. Hard. I was tempted to say it's a gentle swing, again perhaps to distinguish Shank from those overdone blues shouters of a decade ago, who thought all there was to swinging was to sledgehammer the beat.

But though she's subtle, Shank is far from committed to being soft-and-gentle or understated all the time, as when she takes the old folkie "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair" and gradually whips it into a Coltrane-esque emotional frenzy. Much of the pleasure she imparts is in the pure sonic beauty of her tone and timbre. But Shank is also a great interpreter; she first got hooked on jazz through Billie Holiday records, and her singing is as much about the lyrics as the music. On a song of heartbreak, like "Some Time Ago" or "Reflections," there's a distinct sense of loss; when she sings of new love, as on "All of You" or "This Is New," there's an unmistakable mood of romantic discovery and the accompanying exhilaration. By adding her own prologue, the aptly named "Incantation," to Lincoln's "Throw It Away," Shank turns the tune into a chant of spiritual purification.

Shank has come about as far career-wise as one can without the benefit of a major-label contract. As this is being written, she is without any recording affiliation, though there is reason to hope that this will change soon. What are the record companies holding out for? Shank is supremely talented, innovative, and at the same time readily accessible, not to mention about as easy on the eyes as they come—something that has always been a consideration, though perhaps never more than in the past few years. Perhaps it's the record industry's way of proving to critics that we're not as powerful as we would like to think we are, since just about every major jazz scribe has weighed in on her behalf: Gary Giddins, Bob Blumenthal, Don Heckman, Zan Stewart, Gene Seymour, Neil Tesser, Ted Panken, Downbeat, Jazz Times, Time, etc. That Shank is still scuffling, and that she's only done three albums in the last 11 years is proof—not that any was needed—that

our influence is limited when it isn't nonexistent.

Shank's musical background is a mixture of traditional French chansons, American folk music, and jazz. Although born (in 1958) and raised in California, Shank has no relation to the famous West Coast alto saxophonist Bud Shank. Her father, a playwright, taught at the University of California; her mother was a singer and actress (she appeared in *Our Gang* comedies and other Hollywood films as a child). Kendra worked onstage from the time that she was five. When Kendra was not much older than that, her mother took the role of Mrs. Peachum in a university production of *Threepenny Opera*, and, Shank recalls, "she played the original cast album constantly, and she and I both memorized all the songs. I was this little kid going around singing 'Ballad of Sexual Dependency'! Even then I was attracted to those intervals that Kurt Weill used."

She studied piano, guitar, oboe (in her school band), painting, and sculpture; she also had an early and intense interest in French language and culture. By the time of her college years (she attended three universities in the Northwest, and graduated from University of Washington in 1982), Shank was spending a lot of time in France, where she played and sang in street cafés and the Paris Métro. Throughout the late '70s and '80s, she lived mostly in the Northwest, working as a folk singer, interspersed with extended stays in France. "I would do American singer-songwriter stuff in France, James Taylor and Joni Mitchell, because that was interesting and exotic to them," she says, "and then come back and do Jacques Brel in Seattle." She got most of her work in those days by toting her guitar into local French bistros and spontaneously auditioning.

Like the late jazz-cabaret singer Susannah McCorkle, Shank first discovered the American jazz tradition while living abroad, through Billie Holiday records that a European friend played for her in 1988. "I lost all interest in other kinds of music and I just had to do jazz," though, as we have seen, one of the things that makes her jazz so unique is her foundation in these other kinds of music. She bought a fake book of jazz standards and began sitting in at Parisian jazz clubs, where she met Ed Schuller (bassist and son of Gunther Schuller) who advised her that she should study with Jay Clayton (a respected teacher and one of the major avant-garde jazz vocalists to come along in the '70s) when she returned to Seattle. Kendra recalls, "From Jay I got the basics of writing a chart, leading a band, and learning the form of a tune. I immediately turned my French and folk/pop gigs into jazz gigs."

By the early '90s, Shank had sung backup for saxophonist Jim Pepper and singer-songwriter Bob Dorough, and formed lasting protégée-mentor type relationships with singer-pianist Shirley Horn and then with contemporary jazz's greatest singer-songwriter, Abbey Lincoln. Horn introduced Shank to Mapleshade Records, which produced her first album, *Afterglow* (1992), and helped arrange for her to premiere it at the Village Vanguard. Lincoln gave her a place to stay when she first moved to New York, and in 2000, asked Shank to play bluegrass guitar on "Blackberry Blossoms," on her album *Over the Years*. Shank never imitated Shirley, but it was Horn's influence that led her to concentrate on slow ballads on *Afterglow*, which opens with a knowing, vulnerable reading of Elvis Costello's "Almost Blue."

In her last years in Seattle, she worked with bassist Jeff Johnson, whose original compositions appear on both of her subsequent albums, *Wish* (1998) and *Reflections* (2000, both on the Calgary-based Jazz Focus). Shank did not fully relocate to New York until 1997. The late '90s, when the albums were coming out, provided fairly steady work. Shank and her booking agent were able to put together a series of mini-tours across the U.S.A. and Canada that included the Blue Note and Birdland, Blues Alley in D.C., and the Dakota in St. Paul, among many others. *Reflections* (a highlight, "Song a Little Known," is an adaptation of Ellington's "Reflections in D" by Marjorie and Milt Raskin) debuted her regular backup, a trio—Frank Kimbrough, piano, Dean Johnson, bass, and Tony Moreno, drums—that can provide muscular rhythmic force and an expansive harmonic palette as needed.

The Dubya years have been no better for jazz artists than anyone else; record labels pruned their rosters and clubs began sticking only with surefire big names. This is a time when Shank had elected to stay closer to home, declining pursuit of out-of-town gigs in favor of performing in various low-profile New York venues. In February 2002, she performed and recorded at the recently relocated Iridium, producing the finest tape of her music I have heard to date (some of it was played on NPR's *Jazz Set*)—it's a session some label ought to pick up and release. More recently, Shank has been working hard on her most ambitious project, the first songbook album devoted to the music of Abbey Lincoln.

Partly through the inspiration of Clayton and another teacher, Rhiannon, in New York, Shank occasionally includes scat and wordless improvisation in her work. (In 2000 she served as a sideperson, singing trumpet lines with guitarist Peter Leitch and saxophonist Bobby Watson on the former's *Blues on the Corner*.) She also recently recorded a free improvisation with pianist-compere Marian McPartland for *Piano Jazz*. She doesn't do the scat thing all that much, but in a way it's central to her music. "When you go without words, it can take you to a very deep place," she says, "an experience that's beyond the power of words to describe. You're not thinking, you're channeling, you're apart from your analytical mind, what you call improvising is really serving as a vehicle for something that's passing through you. That's what making music is about for me, that's why I love it so much." Perhaps that's why there's no one better in her generation to convey the genuine vitality of jazz singing.