

## blu notes

## Emancipated by Lincoln

By Larry Blumenfeld

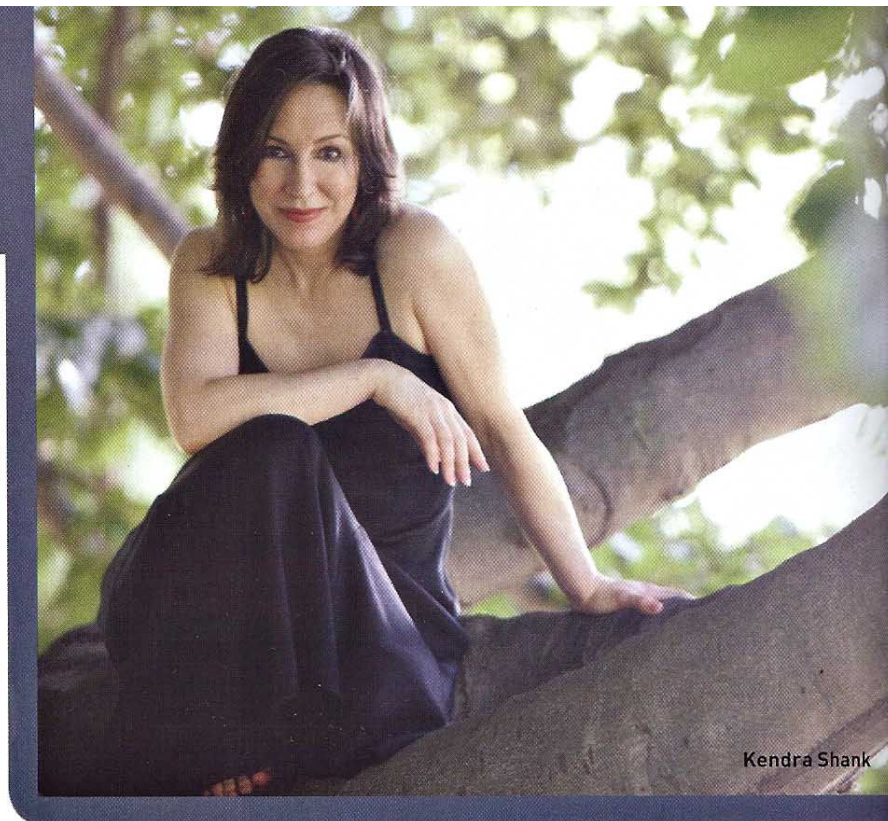
THROUGHOUT HER 2002 LINCOLN CENTER concert series, "Over the Years," Abbey Lincoln seemed to unfurl a banner of identity. Although the singer didn't gain serious recognition until her 60s, at 71, she managed to exude both an elder's wisdom and child-like wonder. More to the point, her performances suggested the many paths possible — through creativity and sheer force — for jazz vocalists willing to go their own way.

That's what Lincoln has always done, and in the years since her 1956 recording, *Affair: a Story of a Girl in Love* (Blue Note), she has pursued her own method of singing: declarative, clearly enunciated, felt more than styled; chanted, hollered, and swooped as needed. Always a writer, Lincoln began to focus more than 20 years ago almost exclusively on her own songs — mostly meditations on love and life, spirits and ancestors, life and death.

Except for the ballad "Down Here Below," Lincoln's compositions have not been widely sung. For me, those three nights at Lincoln Center begged a question: Individualistic as these tunes seem, don't they also offer fertile terrain to mine?

Singer **Kendra Shank**, who attended those Lincoln Center shows, shared the thought. She told her friend, critic Gary Giddins, that she felt inspired to take up the challenge implied by these concerts, to interpret Lincoln's songbook — someday. "Why wait?" he shot back.

Shank, 49, began her career as a folk singer, busking in Paris during the 1970s, "singing American and European folk tunes, country, bluegrass, and French cabaret songs, and always playing guitar," she recalls over the phone from her Manhattan apartment. She came slowly to jazz. In 1989, she began studying with singer Jay Clayton. Shank first met Lincoln at a Thanksgiving dinner at Clayton's home. She went to hear Lincoln perform soon after. "I remember



Kendra Shank

being so struck by how she was in every moment," says Shank. "Her power of intention was so strong, like she was putting the music in your soul, firing the music right inside of you."

Shank sought out Lincoln in New York City, and they became friends. "When I told her that I used to play guitar," Shank recalls, "she encouraged me to play it. 'But I can't play jazz guitar,' I protested." Lincoln wouldn't budge. When Shank played an old fiddle tune, "Blackberry Blossom," Lincoln liked it enough to add lyrics. And when Lincoln recorded her version of the tune on her disc *Over the Years* (Verve, 2000), she invited Shank to play guitar on the track. "I had become some idea of a jazz purist," says Shank, "but she showed me that a song can come from anywhere. You just have to be ready to accept it."

When Shank set out to record *A Spirit Free: Abbey Lincoln Songbook*, for a label named, aptly enough, "Challenge," she accepted another gift — Lincoln's lead sheets. She was struck by the formal complexity of the tunes. Very few are based on the standard 32-bar construction. Shank found verses of varying lengths, absent bridges, and unexpected shifts of meter — a single phrase in two or three, for instance, would interrupt a song set in 4/4 time.

Shank isn't foolish enough to mimic Lincoln's style — to take on her dirge-like tempos or to approximate, say, her tight clench of an "n," for instance, or the lazy

luxury Lincoln takes with an extended "l." Instead, she took inventive liberties to personalize each song.

She introduces "The Music is the Magic" with a five-note ostinato played on a kalimba she'd bought from a street vendor. Before voicing Lincoln's lyric, she sings wordlessly in a nonsense language of her own device. Throughout, Lincoln's melody is never explicitly stated. Shank casts "Not to Worry" in waltz time and "Wholly Earth" as a samba.

In remaking Lincoln's tunes, Shank revisits the place Lincoln urged her toward in their early meetings, her musical beginnings. "Down Here Below" reminded Shank of "those old British Isle ballads I sang in my early years." Gary Versace's accordion and Billy Drewes bass clarinet evoke just such a mood. On "The World is Falling Down," amid Drewes' throaty tenor lines, pianist Frank Kimbrough's honky-tonk chords, and guitarist Ben Monder's twangy guitar, Shank leans toward a country-music croon. Yet Shank and company are far too nuanced for musical caricature. Metric shifts and stylistic appropriations instead offer snapshots of Shanks' experience, as channeled through Lincoln's absorbing worldview.

On the final track, the ballad "Being Me," Shank sings: "It wasn't always easy, learning to be me. Sometimes my head and heart would disagree."

With Lincoln as her guide, Shank splits the difference beautifully. ▲

## personal taste

Bob Weinberg



▲ **Kendra Shank** *A Spirit Free: Abbey Lincoln Songbook* (Challenge)  
— Interpreting songs by a stylist as distinctive as Lincoln is no easy task, but vocalist Shank does a superb job, delving into a substantive set of challenging music and lyrics. Her powerful voice easily carries the weight of classics such as “Bird Alone” and “Wholly Earth,” as she brings her own flourishes to the proceedings, backed by a flexible unit featuring Frank Kimbrough on piano and Billy Drewes on percussion and reeds.

▲ **Max Roach Quartet** *Speak, Brother, Speak!: Max Roach Quartet at the Jazz Workshop* (Debut)

▲ **Benny Goodman** *Benny Goodman Plays World Favorites in High-Fidelity* (Westinghouse)

▲ **Coleman Hawkins with Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis** *Night Hawk* (Prestige/Swingville)