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The Tadd Dameron Vocal Legacy

By Mike Joyce

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Vanessa Rubin

Saturday night at the Kennedy Center KC Jazz Club, vocalist Vanessa Rubin described her tribute to Tadd Dameron, the bebop pianist and composer who died in 1965, as a "work in progress." If so, it came within inches of being a complete joy.

Some fine-tuning is in order, Rubin said of the program, already brimming with lovely melodies, imaginative horn charts and seldom heard tunes. What could further enhance the experience? News that the homage will soon be available on CD would have been welcome -- that's for sure.

Appearing before a capacity crowd that included Dameron's widow, Mia, Rubin was in fine form, her supple voice gracefully negotiating tricky, bop-inspired intervals. But more striking was the interpretative finesse she displayed while performing a wide range of tunes, from torchy ballads ("If You Could See Me Now") and swinging sprees ("Good Bait") to lesser known delights ("Weekend") and amusing novelties ("Kitchenette Across the Hall"). Given the list of renowned jazz vocalists associated with Dameron's work -- Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae spring to mind -- Rubin didn't assign herself an enviable role. Yet she had no difficulty infusing Dameron's legacy with her own personality and musicianship, even when recalling the big-band era days when Vaughan and Billy Eckstine shared the stage together.

Part of the Kennedy Center's ongoing 1940s festival, the concert showcased a first-rate octet, led by trumpeter Cecil Bridgewater and driven by drummer Carl Allen, plus a series of lyrical, lively and lush arrangements crafted by Dameron, Jimmy Heath and Frank Foster, among others.