

Jazz vocalist Rubin plans to give composer his due at BU concert

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You may not have heard of Tadd Dameron, but jazz vocalist Vanessa Rubin is out to change that this Friday when she brings “Sing Dameron! The Tadd Dameron Vocal Legacy” to Binghamton University’s Anderson Center. “Sing Dameron!” debuted at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and, according to Rubin, it has grown and grown.

Rubin, herself a critically acclaimed jazz artist, created the project to bring more attention to the contributions of Dameron, who died in 1965 at the age of 48.

“He’s like an unsung hero. He’s somebody we have enjoyed — we just don’t realize it,” Rubin said, citing Sarah Vaughan’s 1950s recording of Dameron’s “If You Could See Me Now.”

“Two things he liked to stress were beauty and swing, beautiful melodies. If you aren’t familiar with them, I’m going to be presenting some of the ones I think are particularly beautiful from the vocal standpoint.”

But she won’t be alone by any means. Joining Rubin will be her musical director, trumpeter/composer/arranger Cecil Bridgewater; trombonist Clifton Anderson; flutist Patience Higgins; baritone saxophonist Alex Harding; pianist Jon Cowhard and drummer Carl Allen to name a few. Rubin also recruited some of the best arrangers in the business for the project, including such Dameron contemporaries and intimates as the NEA Jazz Masters Frank Foster, Jimmy Heath and Benny Golson, and arranger Willie Smith.

“I think vocals broaden the listening audience because people really relate to lyrics. There’s something about the power of language,” Rubin said. “What I am doing with this project is reintroducing beautiful melodies by Tadd that we have either forgotten about or have never heard of.”

Rubin said that, among other reasons, Dameron may be overlooked because of his frequent hospitalizations during his career — and his tendency to promote the performer more than the composer.

“He was a very sought-after composer and arranger, and because of his harmonic knowledge, he bridged swing with bebop. He was excellent with harmonics, and he considered himself a composer and arranger even though he was a good pianist, too,” she said. “He has quite an extensive song list, but we are not really that familiar with it.

“People who are into pure jazz will have it in their collection or will know about Tadd. But I am talking about the casual listener, who will turn on the radio and say, “I love that song. Who did it?” and it’s always the singer who will get the credit. If Mary J. Blige turned around and did a version of ‘If You Could See Me Now,’ then all of a sudden the hip-hop crowd would love it and would love the song. But it’s still Tadd Dameron’s composition.”

Rubin said another talent Dameron had was the ability to compose and arrange for the smaller groups of the bebop era while still maintaining the large sound people had grown used to in the big band era.

“He could voice them in a way that the sound was really big, taking a few instruments and making it sound like more,” she said. “We’re going to be showcasing some of his tunes by some people who really knew him and knew what he was about. Without great writers and great arrangers, some of the soloists that we celebrate today would not have enjoyed the kind of careers they have had. It’s been a labor of love for me; I am just acknowledging a great, who most of us don’t know about.”