

Singer Nancy Kelly Shows Why She's Called #1 Jazz Singer

New York Jazz singer Nancy Kelly, recently in town for three quick gig dates, left no doubt at all about her talent as a jazz vocalist. Whereas Mark Murphy, Kurt Elling and a few other exponents fill that bill for their gender, Kelly has been referred to as number 1 in that category among females. Without making direct quotes, per se, local musicians were lavish in their praise of the lady's talent, also noting she had touches of Carmen McRae and Ella Fitzgerald in her voice and presentation.

The fact is that she was classically trained in piano and holds her own, and then some, with any musician when it comes to reading and interpreting the music on the charts.

Her three Los Angeles gigs included the Westin Hotel Lobby Court, Back Room at Henri's and Charlie O's. We caught her show at the Back Room at Henri's, where she was accompanied by pianist John Hammond and bassist Jim Hughart, two of Los Angeles' finest players. Kelly, a contralto, needs the best in accompaniment when she performs, musicians who can pick up on the nuances of her phrasing and scatting. When she scats, it's true improvisation, not just musical gobbledygook. Her intonation, timing and rhythm - she swings - are impeccable.

In her three set show at Henri's, some of the songs to which she gave her special touch were "Till There Was You," "Shadow of Your Smile," "I Thought About You," "Walkin' My Baby Back Home," "Rain Or Shine," "It's All Right With Me," "Honeysuckle Rose" and "Masquerade Is Over."

Here's a jazz performer fans of the genre should see. She is usually in the area once or twice a year. Meanwhile, aficionados can get acquainted with her through her latest CD, Born To Swing, featuring her trio plus guest artist, saxophonist Houston Person, and currently available on e internet at www.nancykelly.com.

- Bob Agnew L.A., Jazz Scene June 2006