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KARRIN ALLYSON'S SHOW TAKES TURN FOR THE UNUSUAL

Guest singer Nancy King lets loose her eccentric genius for an evening of rich jazz solos and duets



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SEATTLE -- Singer Karrin Allyson was in the middle of a weeklong stand at the nightclub Jazz Alley, and likely feeling comfortable with her top-notch band, her attentive and appreciative audience and a performance that was cruising along smoothly.

So comfortable that she left the stage during the second Friday night set, letting Portlander Nancy King, her special guest for the Friday and Saturday shows, take over. And suddenly the show started to go off the rails -- not careening over the cliff, mind you, but floating into the rare atmosphere of eccentricity and brilliance that King inhabits and emits.

King launched into a story about how she first met the great Dizzy Gillespie, speaking in a breathless rush, referring to "Sonny" (her late husband, the saxophonist Sonny King) as though everyone knew whom she meant and generally rolling along as though she were at lunch with friends and not in the middle of someone else's concert.

"Well, I guess I don't have to do the song anymore," she finally said with a laugh, realizing how long she'd made its introduction. "I'm sorry. Someone turned the 'on' switch on, and I haven't found the 'off' switch."

Yet when she did sing, navigating the rapids of Gillespie's quicksilver bebop style, there was no mystery about Allyson's generosity in sharing the stage. Allyson's latest album, "Footprints," is a tribute to her jazz vocal heroes, and King ranks up there alongside Jon Hendricks, the more famous vocalese popularizer.

Friday's show was illustrative, perhaps, of why Allyson has become a star and the unpredictable and unpackageable King has not. Except to those who get her particular, peculiar genius, for whom she's something more like the sun than a jazz singer.

Allyson has a warm, rich voice that has the heft for blues and the lithe flexibility for Jobim bossa nova. Her phrasing flows beautifully, even as it retains a Midwestern plain-spokenness. She takes a repertoire that ranges from John Coltrane to James

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Taylor and makes it all sound of a piece. And she brought all those qualities to bear Friday, aided by a fine quartet that included pianist Bruce Barth, bassist Jeff Johnson, the melodically inclined guitarist Rod Fleeman and Todd Strait, a talented Portlander, on drums.

But the moments of real frisson came from the interaction of Allyson's personable professionalism with King's wild spark.

"It's so much fun just being her backup singer," King said during the break between sets. But in truth she was much more than that. On Nat Adderley's "Never Say Yes" and Wayne Shorter's "Footprints" (each adapted by lyricist Chris Caswell), the two displayed an almost sisterly vocal blend, King supporting with her soft, sure lower register one moment, floating high above the next.

"Nancy's my horn player now," Allyson said late in the second set, as King sang sax-like licks behind Allyson's melody, then took a greasy scat solo.

Here's hoping these two never hit the 'off' switch.