

The Sun

Composition Is the New Message

Jazz

By [WILL FRIEDWALD](#) February 8, 2008

Lorraine Feather is expanding the jazz repertoire in her own idiosyncratic way and showcasing the power of composition as much as the power of performance. Ms. Feather is one of the few singer-songwriters in contemporary jazz worth listening to and, along with inspirations Jon Hendricks, Dave Frishberg, and Jay Leonhart (who happens to be playing bass for her this week), virtually the only one whom I want to hear sing nothing but her own lyrics.

Ms. Feather's general strategy is to take classic instrumentals, most often by Fats Waller and Duke Ellington, and write new words for them. Unlike Mr. Hendricks, she does not put lyrics to horn solos; by sticking mostly to piano pieces, she adheres to the pre-written parts rather than improvisations. Also unlike Mr. Hendricks, Ms. Feather's tactic is to discard the original titles and impose her own, a habit that becomes especially apparent when she takes Ellington's metrocentric melodies and relocates them to the far-flung corners of the globe: "Harlem Air Shaft" is now "Calistoga Bay," and "Dooji Wooji" has become "Sweet Honolulu."

A further inspiration for Ms. Feather is Ira Gershwin, who famously took his younger brother's syncopated lines and attached vibrant, slangy language to them. Ms. Feather does the same with melodies that are even more fragmented, staccato, and reliant on sheer rhythm and speed for much of their effectiveness; it's a testament to her skills as a singer that she can keep up with and articulate her own lyrics. "Imaginary Guy" is a vividly re-imagined text to "Dancers in Love," while "Trying To Get Over" and "Indiana Lana" fully capture the jazzy insouciance, sophistication, and hip energy of "Doin' the Voom Voom" and "Jubilee Stomp" (also lyricized as "Music Is a Woman").

Of her songs not based on famous instrumentals, the funniest is "Hit the Ground Runnin'," a Frishbergian compendium of sports announcer clichés. Further illustrating Ms. Feather's allegiance to the Gershwins, the song uses the chord changes to "I Got Rhythm" and swings in the general direction of Thelonious Monk's "Rhythm-A-Ning."

On Tuesday night, the only ESPN expression I noticed that she omitted was "they came to play," which Ms. Feather, Mr. Leonhart, and the pianist Shelly Berg (a West Coaster best known for Oscar Peterson-style modernism who shows, in his work with Ms. Feather, a strong talent for stride) most assuredly did. Apart from Ms. Feather, Abbey Lincoln, and one or two others, original songs (or even semi-original) by contemporary jazz singers are generally to be avoided, almost as much as scatting. I only hope that her remarkable success in this area will not encourage others.