

Recommending Merle Ally

Daily
Dispatch



BackBeat

with Cornelius Thomas

December 27,
2000

WITH the brazen courage that comes with age or urgency, I cut a line of a few hundred people at Dockside, the latest jazz club in Cape Town.

Downstairs, just out of earshot of the ethnic ritual of the ravers at the top level, Virtual Jazz Reality performed standards.

The place was packed.

The music was pumping — fusion tunes and old rhythm and blues.

But, annoyingly, the drummer, although excellent, overpowered almost everyone. The pianist could not be heard, and neither could the lead guitarist.

Flugelhornist Ian Smith tried his best to compete with the drummer, but to no avail. And he exacerbated matters when he tried to sing.

Fortunately bass guitarist Sammy Webber led the way in vintage Victor Bailey style.

And to everyone's delight, the Eastern Cape's own Merle Ally, from Port Elizabeth, sang herself into the hearts of the jam-packed

crowd.

Due to the poor support for jazz in the Eastern Cape, Merle, like Esther Miller, left for Cape Town. For the past several years she has been singing in jazz joints, general gigs and cabaret clubs in the Mother City.

Last week Merle showed why she's so in demand. From Ella Fitzgerald standards to jazzed up Janet Jackson lyrics, Merle kept them dancing, and they kept on asking for more.

She is a class act, and she brought something special to a fairly average outfit.

I observed a small kind of wonder that night. The crowd ranged from ages 16 (I guessed) to 68 (I asked).

What impressed me most was the youngsters knew all the old standards. They even sang along.

Equally, they appreciated jazzed up versions of disco-type tunes of the likes of Thelma Houston, Barry White, Lou Rawls and Janet Jackson.

And I thought that if jazz, tradi-

tionally considered the music of older folk, could transform commercial tunes so both young and old enjoyed them, then there is a kind of magic to the genre.

The evening with Merle, Sammy and the rest taught me anew that jazz comes in many guises, and that it transcends both genre and the age of its audience. It showed clearly that even today's youngsters, who are so often vilified for "their" music, do appreciate jazz.

Over it all soared the husky voice of Ally. And after a while it did not matter that the lead guitarist and the pianist could hardly be heard. It mattered only that young and old became one in appreciation.

Would I recommend Merle Ally and Virtual Jazz Reality to Eastern Capers who happen to visit Cape Town?

If you want to stand accused of dancing, sure. If you just want to enjoy the music and Dockside atmosphere, yes. And mostly I recommend Merle Ally herself.