

# Say hello to Esther Miller

 BackBeat  
with Cornelius Thomas

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**F**RESH from the Birmingham Jazz Festival and an extended stint of gigs at the world-famous Ronnie Scott's in the same city, South Africa's leading mainstream jazz vocalist is coming to the Eastern Cape.

She is Esther Miller, our own Lady Day, and tomorrow she'll be performing in concert at the Port Elizabeth Opera House.

Miller has just this week returned from the United Kingdom where she promoted her recently released album, *Say Hello to Esther*.

Esther was born and raised in Port Elizabeth where, listening to Nat King Cole albums, she fell in love with jazz singing.

She sang in church choirs and through her school days at Bethelsdorp High School. But without giving a career in jazz a thought.

Initially the then undiscovered singing wonder had dreams of becoming a medical doctor. So off she went to the University of Cape Town.

However, there, in 1988, the muse of music called her through a jazz concert by Gerry Spencer's Jazz Cyclone. She found the beats and tone of jazz accorded with what was already in her soul and singing.

The rest is history.

She did some local gigs in Cape Town, but not even the "jazz city" could contain her.

Esther's first professional performance followed shortly after when she recorded a five-song session live on BBC Radio in London.

Since then she has worked with the Cape Town group Jazz Cyclone, Ezra and Duke Ngcukana, Winston Mankunku, and Johnny Fourie — all performers in the Cape jazz tradition.

In the course of the 1990s Esther performed regularly with British saxophonists Dave O'Higgins and Alan Skidmore, and with American guitarists Herb Ellis and Cal Collins.

The last few years have seen Esther captivate audi-



**DARING DIVA:** Esther Miller will be performing in Port Elizabeth tomorrow night.

ences throughout the country — but she is yet to regale East London.

Along with Durban pianist Chantal Sanders, she has also been a regular performer in the Middle East, principally Dubai, over the last four years and did a series of concerts in Finland.

Her most recent South African appearances have been at the Standard Bank Jazz Festival in Grahamstown, the Standard Bank Jazzathon in Cape Town, the Joy of Jazz Festival in Johannesburg, the Port Elizabeth Opera House last September, and The Gignet Theatre Café (Cape Town) last year and early this year.

Since embarking on her jazz career, Esther has studied classical singing with Cape Town's Suzi van Dijk.

After Nat King Cole, Sarah Vaughn, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Blossom Dearie and Frank Sinatra influenced her style into the velvet purity of Lady Day

first and then into her unique voice.

With Esther you don't listen to the words but how she sings them, and you understand with your heart.

One of the more exciting developments in Esther's career has been her teaming up with Errol Dyers' band which, with their Cape jazz, keeps Esther in contact with her roots.

The Dyers band will be backing Esther in Port Elizabeth tomorrow night.

Esther Miller recently told me East London is the only major South African centre where she is yet to perform. Her willingness to deliver here stands as an open offer to local producers and especially the newly formed Dyani-Pukwana Jazz Foundation to bring one of South Africa's finest jazz talents to this city.

In six weeks' time it's back to Birmingham for Esther, so the local producers will have sufficient time to organise a long-overdue Esther Miller concert for this city's jazz lovers.