

## High-spirited singer Kristi Merideth makes jazz fun

Jazz, that art form that makes some people scratch their heads, can be fun — especially when Kristi Merideth sings.

Starting with her hard-swinging approach to American songbook and jazz standards, she's giving off all kinds of cues that jazz is fun — rhythm bursting from neck and shoulders, eyes widening at a dramatic moment in a melody. She's wrapped up in the song, enjoying herself and having a great time with her bandmates.

In these and other ways, she is also defying stereotypes of jazz singing, especially women singing jazz. Her repertoire of more than 200 songs is not limited to sad or romantic numbers. She favors up-tempo tunes, and she does not expect band members to limit themselves to just supporting her.

"I never wanted to be a torch singer. I rarely do ballads, even now," she said. "That's a cliché, a stereotype of chicks singing jazz."

Merideth, who sings regularly on Thursdays at Springfield Brewing Co. and Fridays at the Tower Club, said she encountered a producer early in her career who wanted to shape her look and her songs to fit the stereotype. She resisted.

"I wanted to be more relatable to everyone, because people hear a little jazz and they're terrified," she said, acknowledging a common view of jazz as snobby and fastidious. She wanted to avoid those pitfalls. "And I certainly didn't want to be the chick with the ball gown singing the romantic song. That's not me."

Starting out, Merideth looked to Sarah Vaughan for a model. When she realized she was picking up too many of Vaughan's mannerisms, she studied Miles Davis' approach to the tunes she was learning. "I decided I could learn the melody by listening to him. He usually plays straight-ahead the first time through," she said. "That was my jazz education."

Merideth favored the hard-swinging Davis sides recorded in the 1950's — "Cookin'," "Relaxin'," "Workin'" and "Steamin'," from which she gleaned such tunes as "If I Were a Bell."

At first, she sought out the most obscure songs she could find, such as Blossom Dearie's version of "Rhode Island Is Famous for You." She has since come around to embrace well-known songs like "Fly Me to the Moon," whose familiarity and staying power are evidence of their quality.

She's not all jazz, though. Amy Winehouse and Erykah Badu came up in conversation, and she's working on original songs with pop and soul flavors. With the band at Springfield Brewing Co. — Karnell Robinson (drums), Kyth Trantham (bass) and Jacob Hiser (keys) — she is branching out a little into R&B, such as "Just the Two of Us" by Bill Withers, she said.

With any given song, the musicians like to stretch out with expansive solos. Robinson's drum solos often take a song into entirely different realms of tempo and rhythm, then all the way back to where it started.

Merideth said she respects the musicians for their nimble bandstand adaptability.

"I have the list in front of me of all the tunes, and I'll run across one that we haven't done in maybe a year, and I think, oh, we should do it," she said. "Great musicians can pull out lead sheets and perform almost anything."

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