

SHARNY RUSSELL: A WOMAN OF EXQUISITE TASTE AND ARTISTRY

Reviewed by Eric Myers

Venue 505, Sydney

March 30, 2017

This performance by the vocalist/pianist Sharny Russell at the 505 more or less recaptured the exquisite ambience of her newly-released CD *Comes a Time*. It was an impressive demonstration of a multi-talented artistry that, as far as I know, is unique in Australian jazz.

Occasionally leading figures in the Australian jazz community declare that, in this country, we have some of the best musicians in the world. Paul Grabowsky is reported to have described the Australians Scott Tinkler and Phil Slater as “the two most important trumpeters in the world”.

Initially, this kind of comment sounds fatuous. But every Australian who travels the world listening to jazz, knows that it’s true. The catch is, of course, that those musicians are down here – Down Under - and are known only to us.

In the same spirit, but more temperately, I could say that Sharny Russell is one of the most important scat singers in the world. Who knows?



Sharny Russell at the piano: she could be one of the most important scat singers in the world...PHOTO CREDIT STEVE BARRETT

After hearing Sharny Russell, I toyed with the idea of calling her “Australia’s Diana Krall”. In a sense, that’s inane. But Russell and Krall share some qualities. Both are splendid singers seated at the piano, whose styles are informed by a deep musicality. That musicality, I believe, comes from knowledge of the keyboard inculcated at an early age. Both are capable of measured, compact piano solos which are often very beautiful in their simplicity. Both work with very fine musicians who can really play, and give those musicians considerable solo space.

But there the comparison falters. Compared to our home-grown artist, Diana Krall's talent is somewhat one-dimensional. Sharny Russell has gone on to master several techniques that are unknown to Diana Krall. One does not hear Krall singing wordless vocals in unison with her own piano lines. Nor does Krall, as far I know, compose. When you're married to Elvis Costello, why bother?



The saxophonist Paul Cutlan: a formidable player in the Sharny Russell team, given a lot of solo space... PHOTO CREDIT DAVID MACCULLAGH

So, while the Australian effortlessly ticks all of Krall's boxes, there is much more to Russell's artistry. In addition to instrumental musicianship, which is a given, we also have a composer, who writes not only the melodies, but the lyrics as well. Her experiences of life and love are there in the songs. The lyrics tend to be more literal than poetic, but they are a slice of life, and they resonate with all of us.

However, these compositions are not just songs. Significantly, they serve a practical musical purpose. They are formidable vehicles for showcasing Sharny's myriad talents. In a nutshell, we have here a multi-talented artist. Sharny Russell attempts a lot – much more than most Australian jazz artists - and brings it all off, not merely successfully, but exquisitely.

I don't know Sharny Russell well; I met her for the first time at the 505. But I had stumbled across her many years ago, at the 1998 Bellingham Jazz Festival where she was performing with her All Blue Trio. This festival was stacked with leading jazz musicians from all over the country. But even in that company Sharny was a beacon of light.

Still, I had never heard any of her recorded music until her CD *Comes a Time* came my way. That album was a revelation. I played it a few times, and was hooked. If it's not a

masterpiece, then it is at least a *tour de force*. Here is the multi-talented jazz artist on display. What I write here is as much a review of the CD as it is of the 505 performance.

A word about scat singing: wordless vocals, or nonsense syllables sung to improvised melodies. In 1926 Louis Armstrong dropped his lyrics sheet while recording *Heebie Jeebies*. He had to continue singing into the mike; if he had bent over to pick up the sheet he would have ruined the recording, so he completed the track with a wordless vocal. Since then, many people have believed he invented scat singing. It's a myth, of course. It was already in existence before that seminal incident in Armstrong's career.



Louis Armstrong: there is a myth that he invented scat singing in 1926...

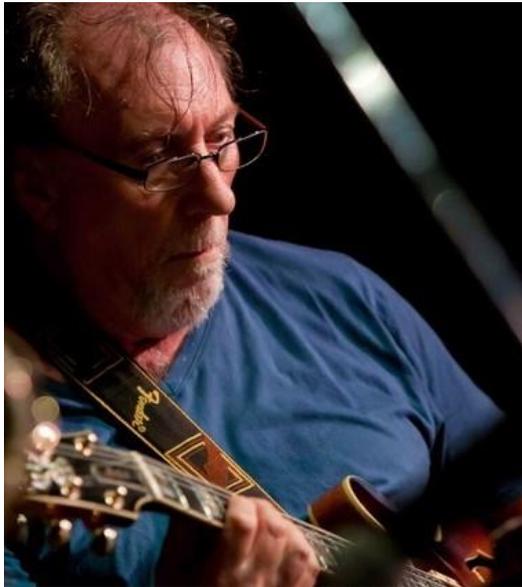
Any singer can attempt scat singing, and many do. It's not for the fainthearted, and it takes some courage. I believe it is the most difficult expression of creative skill in jazz. The singer is afforded enormous freedom to create: the melody, the vowels, the syllables - whatever sounds that come to mind. But this mode of expression also has the greatest potential for error - for lapses in taste; and for being out-of-tune. Most jazz singers should leave it alone.

At this performance in the 505 Sharny Russell did most of the tunes on her *Comes A Time* CD, and some others in her repertoire. Apart from anything else, this was a convincing and effortless display of scat singing at the highest level. And she swings. And sings in tune. And is very hip. Put it this way: Sharny has nailed scat singing.

But, typically, in the case of this jazz artist of such talent, there is a little more on her plate. Having honed orthodox scat singing, a la Ella and Sassy, Russell has moved on to the newer, and somewhat more refined, branch of scat singing: the scat line in unison with her own instrumental line, in this case on the piano.

This technique has been around since Slam Stewart hummed along with his own bass lines, and was popularised more recently by the great American guitarist George Benson. Benson

made an art form out of it, and took it to the masses. Many of his fans primarily adore his singing, but aficionados know that Benson was a brilliant jazz guitarist before emerging as a vocalist. His scat lines exemplify the jazz tradition. Sharny Russell is in the same mould.



The left-handed guitarist Jeremy Sawkins: one of a number of formidable musicians accompanying Sharny Russell... PHOTO CREDIT DAVID MACCULLAGH

A word on the musicians who are on the *Comes A Time* album, and also came to perform at the 505: Sally Cameron (background vocals), Paul Cutlan (saxophones, flute & clarinet), Jeremy Sawkins (guitar), Brendan Clarke (double bass) and Gordon Rytmeister (drums).



The bassist Brendan Clarke: another formidable musician featured with Sharny Russell... PHOTO CREDIT DAVID MACCULLAGH

In anyone's language, this is a formidable team of leading Australian musicians, herded together by Sharny Russell. All their brilliance and professionalism, which contribute so much to the success of the album, were on display at the 505. Jazz is a team game, and they deserve as much credit as does Sharny, for the quality of the music produced. With such musicians playing so beautifully, the 505 performance was packed with delightful solos, too numerous to describe here.

Early in the performance at the 505, there was some tension in the air. I put it down, at the time, to a sound balance which relegated Sharny's vocals and piano sound a little too far back in the mix. The guitar, bass and drums were bullying the music. Even such a minor imbalance can cause tension in a room. Or possibly there was some nervousness in the air, as the musicians warmed up, on the pathway to relaxation. Later I discovered that, before the performance, Sharny suffered from an unusual attack of acid reflux, a disconcerting condition which she felt inhibited her performance.

By the time she got to her version of Ellington's *I'm Beginning To See The Light* though, midway through the first set, the room was calm. The sound balance had come good, and the music was flowing naturally. I think the Duke would not be unhappy with Sharny's recomposition of his well-known standard. Or, should I say "decomposition"? Only the lyrics and the bridge survive from the original, but the result is an agreeable one. It's the sort of track on an album that one looks forward to hearing again and again.



The drummer Gordon Rytmeister: another formidable musician...
PHOTO CREDIT BILL RISBY

The late Roger Frampton once described himself as a "comprehensivist", in the sense that he was so adept that he could play with any other musician. Sharny Russell is a comprehensivist too, but in a slightly different sense. She is adept in virtually all time-feels: the Latin-jazz samba (*Calling Out My Name; Lara*); the gentle medium swing feel, with Gordon Rytmeister using brushes (*Colour Me; On Top of The World*); the hard swinging tune in four (*Never Goes Out Of Style; Set Yourself Free*); the gentle bossa nova (*I've Grown Accustomed To His Face; Flowers*); the slow tune in 12/8 (*The Key*).

Not only that, Sharny shows that she can handle the big ballad (the unusual Dimitri Tiomkin/Ned Washington standard *Wild Is The Wind*) and, in a startling composition - in the light of current politics - she nails domestic violence (*Crossing The Line*). Is that not

enough? If you want more, the last track on the *Comes A Time* CD is an unaccompanied scat solo on the changes of *Stella By Starlight*, which Sharny calls *Stella a Capella*. She tossed it off on her way out of the studio, after completing the album.



The team, after the gig (L-R) Jeremy Sawkins, Sally Cameron, Paul Cutlan, Sharny Russell, Brendan Clarke, Gordon Rytmeister... PHOTO CREDIT DAVID MACCULLAGH

Sharny Russell and her confreres help us celebrate so much: life, love, music, jazz, composition, scat singing, instrumental brilliance. And that's not to mention the rich background vocals on her CDs, which were approximated judiciously at 505 by The Idea of North's Sally Cameron, as the one backing vocalist available. This is another string to Sharny's sturdy bow, taking her sometimes into pop territory, with Quincy Jones-like taste.

So, it's a comprehensive menu. Sharny attempts a lot – much more than most. The fact that she brings it off so flawlessly is a wonder to behold. And so I say unto jazz fans around the country, wake up Australia. From a quiet backwater in northern New South Wales a major jazz artist is emerging. If Sharny Russell is not sabotaged by poor sound during her forthcoming Australian tour, I believe she will deliver.

SHARNY RUSSELL'S TOUR ITINERAY:

Fri 10th Mar, 7:30 pm, Brisbane Jazz Club, Brisbane
Thurs 30th Mar, 8pm, Venue 505, Sydney
Fri 5th May, 7:30pm, Bangalow Bowling club, Bangalow
Fri 19th May, 8pm, David Williamson Theatre, Prahran, Melbourne
Sat 20th May, 7:30pm, Utas Recital Hall, Hobart
Sun 11th June, 4pm Navy Club, Fremantle
Mon 12th June, 7:30pm, Ellington Jazz Club, Perth
Sun 2nd July, 2:30pm, Toowoomba, The Office
Sun 23rd July, 2pm, Adelaide, La Boheme
Sun 8th October, 2pm, Lismore Bowling Club

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