

**Amanda Powell *Beyond Boundaries*:
CD release party at the Bop Stop (Jan. 31)**



by Jane Berkner

Jazz concerts can often be formulaic. We expect to hear selections from the Great American Songbook, most often played or sung in a predictable form. But the jazz concert on Friday, January 30 at the Bop Stop featured Amanda Powell, and she's anything but predictable.

Billed as a release party for the aptly named CD, *Beyond Boundaries*, the audience traveled into Powell's deeply personal world of music, which spans multiple time periods and cultures. Most of the music performed came from the CD, with original compositions that included blues, jazz, folk and early music influences.

The program opened with two original blues-based tunes adorned by Howie Smith on saxophone. Smith was a strong presence throughout the concert, providing some outside-the-box improvisations and an exciting exchange of musical ideas with Powell.

Powell kept up an ongoing conversation with the audience, explaining her world view and her motivation for singing the wide range of music that interests her. She asked us, “What is the human experience in other countries and other cultures, in China, in the Middle East or in Bulgaria?” In her many journeys around the globe, she explores this question through the sharing of song.

In the first half, the answer came in the form of a folk song from Bulgaria depicting women gathered for a quilting bee, and its accompanying gossip. The second half included a prayer for peace sung both in Hebrew and Arabic. This haunting and soulful prayer, the CD’s title track, opened a clear window into Powell’s spiritual leanings.

Powell possesses a light, versatile voice with an expansive range. A trained classical musician, she frequently performs with Cleveland’s Baroque Orchestra, Apollo’s Fire. She brings abundant vocal technique and a keen ear to her improvisations, as well as a balance of freedom and structure.

Her infectious spirit kept the audience involved. She got everyone to sing along with her and invited us to dance, should we feel the desire. Throughout the evening, the occasional couple took her up on this offer. In a moment of impromptu exuberance, one enthusiastic audience member was invited on stage to dance during Powell’s upbeat, salsa-like *Mimema*.

A strong element of the program was the pairing of tunes with similar themes, for example, a full moon. In *Tonada*, the moon glows over the plains of Venezuela where the mundane task of milking a cow is taking place. In its pairing, *Waiye*, a breeze stirs the palm trees and the moon is reflected in the ocean surrounding the Pacific Islands. Powell’s slit drum added an island sound, a lighter version of the sound of pan drums.

Dr. Daniel Shoskes joined Powell for two Renaissance works, playing first lute and then Baroque guitar in works by John Dowland and Ronn McFarlane. While it was wonderful to hear the Renaissance-era sounds incorporated into the concert, the dry acoustics of the room made for a less than successful performance of them.

Powell produced the CD with bassist Dave Morgan, who shares her interest in global music and varied musical styles. Morgan’s ample composing and arranging skills were on display throughout the evening’s program, and his strong bass playing brought stability to the group backing the singer, which included Alton Merrell, piano and Ed Davis, percussion. Merrell was quite melodic in his improvised solos, most notably on the Billie Holiday tune, *Left Alone*. Davis’s set playing was tasteful, and his hand drumming added the exotic spiciness needed for world music.

One of the highlights of the evening was a tune that Dave Morgan wrote and orchestrated for Powell's powerful lyrics in *Consolation*. Powell introduced her good friend, pianist Anne Wilson, who joined her on stage along with Howie Smith on clarinet. It turns out that it was Wilson who introduced Amanda Powell to Dave Morgan. We can only hope that the pairing of these two creative musicians continues to bring more successful concerts and CDs to our future.

Photo courtesy of Erica Brenner.

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