

Divas reign at Tri-C JazzFest (June 21 & 22)

by Peter Feher



The divas didn't have to share the stage at Tri-C JazzFest this year. After a 2023 lineup that saw star singers paired with other performers or as part of larger projects, this summer's schedule put the spotlight back on solo acts.

Creative freedom reigned in headlining sets by Cécile McLorin Salvant and Ledisi — two very different artists who could only come together here, under the big tent that is jazz. Both vocalists have a singular sensibility that somewhat transcends the limits of genre, although that's where the similarities end.

In an intimate yet expansive song recital at the Mimi Ohio Theatre on Friday, June 21, Salvant (*above*) showed how sound can really make a story. Her tone — soft, supple, and a little bit strange — sets her apart and stays with you long after the music has died away.

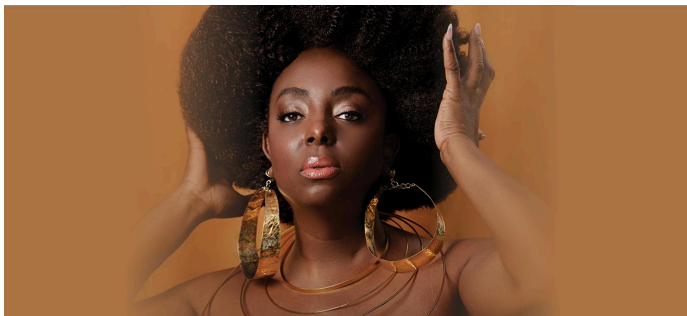
She opened her performance with an original, “Fog,” a sparse, spectral number that highlighted her and her bandmates' superb sensitivity. On brushes, drummer Aaron Kimmel teased the texture — similar to the way bassist Yasushi Nakamura would soften the sound later in the evening when he picked up his bow for another original, “Thunderclouds.” These compositions suggest something of the abstract, avant-garde approach that informs Salvant's artistry.

But this is also a singer who knows her audience, and Salvant didn't stint on simple joys at JazzFest. She delivered an infectious, upbeat interpretation of Burt Bacharach's “(There's) Always Something There to Remind Me,” followed by some spoken remarks in deference to Dionne Warwick, the song's first performer. In the style of a cabaret show, cheerful commentary accompanied almost every number on Friday.

So it was a natural segue to introduce “If Momma Was Married,” one of the daughters’ numbers from Jule Styne and Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Gypsy*, in the characters’ context. Here and with another Broadway tune — “If This Isn’t Love” from Burton Lane and E.Y. Harburg’s *Finian’s Rainbow* — Salvant identified her material not by the composer-lyricist teams involved but by describing the musicals themselves. This wasn’t a slight but rather the highest honor, conveying all of the life a song can have long after its creators.

The spark of storytelling also lit up Salvant’s delivery of standards. Like an actress, she gave new emphasis to every emotional beat of “Guess Who I Saw Today,” letting the final lyric (“you”) land with fresh inevitability. That same sense of narrative, leading to an ultimate reveal, drove a bring-down-the-house rendition of Bessie Smith’s “Black Mountain Blues,” which gained momentum from pianist Sullivan Fortner’s brilliant backing. He stood hunched over his instrument, strumming its strings for a bold banjo effect.

The set concluded with another production number — “Somehow I Never Could Believe,” the big soprano aria from Kurt Weill and Langston Hughes’ opera *Street Scene* — Salvant again confirming her supreme suitability for the stage.



The scene for the show on Saturday, June 22 was the Connor Palace, and Ledisi (*left*) brought the stadium-sized energy to match. The singer, actress, and all-around adept entertainer would have commanded the huge venue even if her band and backing vocalists hadn’t been mic’d to the max.

In fact, the songs that were most stripped down — like a passionate, pulsing arrangement of Nina Simone’s “Be My Husband” that had only Greg Clark Jr.’s drumming as accompaniment — were also the evening’s most memorable. The two Simone numbers (an extended jam session on “See-Line Woman” came next) sounded spontaneous in a way that much of the rest of the set simply didn’t.

With this material, Ledisi showed off sensational vocal stylings, including an impressive scat, and she actually used amplification to the music’s advantage, her microphone switched to an echo effect for one illuminating section.

The majority of the performance was dedicated to Ledisi’s discography, from her hit R&B singles “Alright,” “Pieces of Me,” and “Anything for You” to half a dozen tracks

off her latest album, *Good Life*. The singer acknowledged her music's slight distance from jazz in several asides throughout the evening, touching on genre, history, and her desire to stick to her own artistic sensibility.

That said, she did seem to tailor some of her delivery to the setting, notably in the generous rapport she kept up with members of her band. Backing vocalists David Michael Wyatt and Sarah Williams each got a solo feature. JazzFest may have strayed a little from its usual style on closing night, but Saturday's show still delivered plenty of high notes.

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