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NEWS

Local jazz star shines with release of new CD

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Jazz vocalist Kimberly Ford has been plying the underground Santa Barbara jazz scene in Santa Barbara for nearly a decade, singing standards and the occasional original in such upper end nightspots as Stella Mare's, the Bacara and the San Ysidro Ranch. But now, the Goleta resident is unleashing her second CD, the ocean-themed "Songs in the Key of Sea."

Not to mix terrestrial metaphors, but it seems like she's finally bubbling to the surface.

The album is rife with references to the sea from the standards she chose ("How Deep is the Ocean," "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea" and "Beyond the Sea"), the more unusual covers (Ivan Linz' "Island," Chick Corea's "Sea Journey"), and a few choice compositions she wrote with guitarist Mark Waggoner, including "Sea Change" and "Watermark."

Ford is still exercising her penchant for unusual venues - rather than concretizing at a club or theater, Ford will celebrate the disc's release at a party at the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum tonight. But it's not a venue chosen at random. Ford has a long association with the Maritime Museum, from creating a children's program to lending her voice to the soundtrack at the museum's permanent exhibit on the wreckage of the Winfield Scott.

The museum will also be continuously screening a new DVD that accompanies the album and features two short water-themed videos set to music by Ford.

We caught up with Ford for a sneak preview earlier this week.

Q. How did you come to sing jazz?

A. When I first started singing, back when I lived in Santa Barbara in the '70s, I did everything. I was exploring styles in my voice and where it wanted to go. But it was meeting my longtime teacher, Jay Clayton, 17 years ago.

When I heard what she did vocally with jazz, that was it. I haven't sung much else since.

Jazz is the most interesting and challenging music to do as a vocalist. In a deeper sense, you have the most freedom to explore your ideas as well as just using your voice any way you want.

Q. Your CD shows a variety of styles, from straight-ahead interpretations to genre-bending - and note-bending - techniques that seem quite modern. Who have been your main influences?

A. While I do have some influences, I don't try to emulate them, but there is no way to get around that when you really admire them. Jay of course is the biggest influence.

Sheila Jordan also, her Be Bop style.

And there have been horn players and pianists you try to sound like, plus composers and arrangers. I like to do more out-there stuff, but I'm not sure people are ready for it.

Q. Why an ocean theme for the new CD?

A. I went back to school at Antioch a few years ago to complete my degree, and they allow you to craft some of your projects. I've always had a passion for film and documentaries as well as the outdoors, so I got an internship with (local underwater filmmaker) Mike deGruy, and ended up staying with him full time for four years.

Through that process I did composing for some documentaries. I've had an opportunity to see what's under the sea, and I wanted to draw people's attention to how amazing and beautiful it is.

One day, it just came to me how songs I could collect that were connected to the ocean, and I realized there were many beautiful ones that I love to sing. I thought about how I could combine all the things I'm really passionate about.

You should also know that recording is expensive, and I wanted to have some partners. Both the museum and the National Marine Sanctuary (really stepped up to help. I've done some shoots out there on the Channel Islands and its absolutely magical. I wanted to give something back to them too. (Hence her soundtrack for the NMS video on the DVD)

Q. What can you tell me about the original songs on the album?

A. First, we only did them because licensing for three of the songs I was going to do fell through at the last minute. So the guys brought in things they had written as instrumentals, and I wrote ocean-themed lyrics for them. Two of them came directly out of my experience of making the album — "Sea Change" about transitions and being in that difficult period of limbo. "Water Mark" I named after Mark.

"Sea" was written by Jason Harnell while he was hanging out in the waves on a boogie board. I guess when you're a drummer you can do things like that. It sounded so much like an avant garde sea chanty, so I wrote the lyrics that way. It's all over the place in time signatures, just wild and fun.

Q. So what's next for you? Is this going to make you a big jazz star?

A. Santa Barbara is a very difficult play to exist full time as a jazz artist. I love playing here. But there are very, very — did I say very? — few venues who support jazz or can pay well enough to make any kind of a living. You have to think a little bit more globally. So I'm starting a national tour next month, and I'll be at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. And there's been a lot of interest in Japan and Portugal. I'd also love to do more projects like this involving other aspects of environmental issue. The possibilities are endless when you start doing weather music.