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The Song Is You

Kimberly Ford Sings Her Sea Story

by Charles Donelan

Next Thursday, the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum will host a CD release party and performance by Kimberly Ford, a jazz singer with a connection to the ocean. It's a beautiful CD and the making of it is a great story—a classic Santa Barbara tale of persistence, community, and creative integrity. The format for the event includes continuous screenings of a film collaboration Ford has done with Emmy-winning underwater filmmaker Mike deGruy and a live performance by Ford with her band. The show will consist of tunes off her latest album, *Songs in the Key of Sea*, which was recorded in fall 2006 with a band including Mark Waggoner on guitar, Ryan McGillicuddy on bass, and Jason Harnell on drums. On the album, Ford's amazingly heartfelt and agile voice stretches the limits of the heady mix of standards and originals.

Ford embodies many principles we would all do well to consider living by, and they are as good a way as any to get into the story behind *Songs in the Key of Sea*. Principle number one would have to be "stay true to your dreams." Singing for her entire adult life, Ford has played many a venue, including small clubs in the evenings after long days on the ski slopes when she was younger to the hour of practice she squeezes in these days between appointments in the busy schedule she keeps as the mother of two teenagers. She has lived in Santa Barbara, the Sierras, Park City, Utah, and Seattle, where jazz singer and vocal teacher Jay Clayton gave her an important boost on her journey toward recording and performing. Which brings us to principle number two, "put trust in your friends and mentors." Speaking with Ford last week, I was continuously struck by how openly grateful she was to her network of friends and collaborators. When



KIMBERLY KAVISH

asked about working with Clayton, she lit up, reminiscing about the nervousness and excitement she felt when approaching her for the first time, as though it had happened yesterday. Ford was very fortunate that she found such a subtle and rigorous teacher and managed to stay close to her for so long—the result is a sound that's pure, fresh, and utterly free from cliché.

The making of the CD was fraught with drama. A certain jazz great who shall remain nameless had contributed the music that was to accompany the underwater film and was perhaps the most unusual and distinctive element in the project. At the last minute, well after post-production, Mr. Big rescinded his offer and left Ford with a whale-sized obstacle. For *Songs* to go forward, the soundtrack to the film would have to be redone from scratch. "My first response was to go to bed for three days," she said. Fortunately, her second response illustrates another great principle of life, Kimberly Ford-style: "Get back up!" Within weeks of realizing her linchpin composition had to be scratched, she had gotten together with her band and written three originals, one of which took the place of the withheld standard as the soundtrack to the film. From the brink of defeat, new beauty arose.

The DVD that accompanies Ford's CD contains some of the most magical underwater film footage you will ever see. Ford has worked with filmmaker deGruy for years, and in her heart, the need for awareness and education about the fragility of the environment lives close to the source of her creativity. The fact that this event will raise money and awareness for the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation reveals yet another firm principle guiding Ford's whole way of life: "Put it all together." She has a deeply political side, and it manifests not only in her activism and fundraising, but in her approach to music, as well. She sees what she is doing as providing a richer, more broadly available message than either music or eco-activism alone could provide. Santa Barbara is known for both, and with *Songs in the Key of Sea*, Kimberly Ford looks set to bring them all home.

Singer Kimberly Ford will be at the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum on Thursday, May 17, for a CD release party and performance.