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Bria Skonberg: A young jazz star on the rise

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Three years ago, singer and guitarist John Pizzarelli was headlining an international jazz festival in Victoria, British Columbia, and was dining in a hotel lounge on his night off. A member of the quartet playing in the background invited him onstage.

"I normally would sit in with the group on one number," Pizzarelli recalled. He quickly warmed to the doe-eyed bandleader, Bria Skonberg, who sang in a style that was playful and sultry. All of a sudden, she picked up her trumpet

and the room filled with an ebullient, roaring style reminiscent of Louis Armstrong's.

Pizzarelli, mesmerized, remained glued to the stage for two sets.

"It was a total surprise," said Pizzarelli, whose father is the celebrated jazz guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli. "My dad later heard her and goes, 'You hear this girl play trumpet? She's unbelievable.'"

Her appeal also led jazz authority Will Friedwald to rhapsodize in his Wall Street Journal music column last year, "Bria Skonberg looks like a Scandinavian angel (or Thor's girlfriend), plays trumpet like a red hot devil, and sings like a dream."

He left out that Skonberg can also hula-hoop while playing her horn but, really, why brag on her? "It just takes practice," she said recently over the phone, "and maybe a little sangria."

Skonberg, who will perform April 20 at the DC Lindy Exchange at Glen Echo Park's Spanish Ballroom, is resting on the precipice of wider recognition. At age 29, she was nominated earlier this month by the Jazz Journalists Association for its up-and-coming artist of the year award.

Her two CDs convey an eclectic free spirit. She had an impassioned feel for chestnuts such as "I'll Never Be the Same," and her versatile repertoire also includes a jazzed up version of the Cardigans' '90s alt-rock hit "Lovefool" and a sly interpretation of Janis Joplin's satiric gospel about material desire, "Mercedes Benz." She remodeled "Come On-a My House" — the quasi-Armenian folk song popularized by Rosemary Clooney in 1951 — with what she called a "swampy groove."

Skonberg, who likes to reimagine older jazz songs through a modern prism, once interpreted the 1920s stomper "King of the Zulus" as a collaboration between Armstrong and Jimi Hendrix. To make the effect work, she attached to her trumpet bell a wireless, clip-on microphone connected to a guitar-effects pedal and created a distorted sound reminiscent of the influential 1960s guitarist.

"Some of the ideas I've had over the years, I just thought it would be funny," she said. "I played in ska bands and like all kinds of music. People hear traditional jazz and think it's stale, where there are so many ways it can be opened up. With New Orleans and old-time grooves, there's no limit in what can be done with that. I want to break the stereotype of what traditional jazz is."

From her home in Brooklyn, she tours like a dervish — popping up at clubs, festivals and jazz clinics around North America — and has accompanied on stage and in recordings widely admired performers including Pizzarelli, composer and trombonist Wycliffe Gordon and her mentor, the trumpeter Warren Vache.

It's Vache, she said, who keeps her from plateauing musically by offering effective, if blunt criticism: "Use your ears. Does that sound good? No."

"I overthink a lot, so it was useful," Skonberg said cheerfully.

She's relentlessly cheery, in fact, especially for someone who as a singer worships Anita O'Day, a vocalist once dubbed the "Jezebel of Jazz" for her hard-living ways. In contrast, Skonberg's professional life has been rather charmed so far, propelled by jazz veterans drawn in by her talent, determination and charisma.

Gordon, who plays frequently with trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, calls her "the full package" and "a young person who knows the traditional music and can play with such great command."

"The thing that separates Bria from other young players is she knows how to perform, how to talk to the audiences and engage with the audience," Gordon said. "She lights up on stage and automatically gets your attention."

At Capilano University in North Vancouver, Skonberg received a degree in jazz trumpet instrumental performance in 2006 and landed a job with Dal Richards, a nonagenarian bandleader known as Canada's King of Swing. She kept winning jazz festival awards and, in 2009, recorded her first solo album, "Fresh."

It was produced by Paul Airey, an industry veteran who also produced one of Michael Buble's first albums. "She really caught my attention, that a lady that young would be able to play and hold her own in a trumpet section as competitive as it can be," Airey said of Skonberg's work with Richards.

"And they asked her to sing a solo, and she had the trumpet over her arm and owned the stage," he added. "She caught the attention of everyone in the audience. I was impressed how mature she was with her melodies and her musical statements, her rhythmic ideas, her jazz ideas."

He said that, like Buble, Skonberg exudes a "special quality that few people possess, an exceptional talent and determination and drive to perform. Her potential is unlimited."

Skonberg moved to New York in 2010, sensing that she'd outgrown the opportunities back home. She recorded an album last year, "So Is the Day", that features Gordon and Pizzarelli and rose to No. 7 on the national jazz charts.

She said she remains vividly aware of how hard it can be to break through in New York.

But on her first day in the city, she was busking in Washington Square Park. "Wynton Marsalis walked by," she recalled, "and I said to myself, 'Holy crap. This is a sign. The world's greatest trumpet player just walked by.' He stopped and gave me thumbs up."

Bria Skonberg