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Music Review | Freddy Cole

Stalwart of an Old Style, but With His Own Identity

By NATE CHINEN
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The singer and pianist Freddy Cole exudes a gallant but unfussy brand of cool. Addressing a dinner-hour crowd at the Jazz Standard on Thursday, he described his own show as “an invitation to relaxation” — something to take the edge off after, say, a long day of shopping, or “whatever it is you ladies do.”



The smile he then flashed was debonair, knowing and a little mischievous. So was his reading of the following tune, a former Frank Sinatra vehicle called “Don’t Change Your Mind About Me.”

Mr. Cole is among the surviving stalwarts of an oldfangled mode of jazz singing, one that now belongs mainly to the realm of cabaret. He’s a melody man, allergic to undue embellishment, and his maturity manifests as understatement.

At 78 he has earned the right not to be defined in relation to his older brother Nat King Cole, who also sang at the piano, favored many of the same songs and employed similar instrumentation. So for the record: he really doesn’t sound like Nat, except when he does.

There was one such moment early in the set, involving his timbre and phrasing on the standard “I See Your Face Before Me.” But that was basically it for evocation. Mr. Cole has his own voice, raspier and less solicitous than his brother’s, and his own sort of charisma, with hints of bluesy gruffness behind the composure.

His set was typically full of love songs, avowals of attachment or yearning. But he didn’t convey the impression of someone given to extremes of feeling, whether that meant a swoon or a sob. Performing “If I Love Again,” a forlorn ballad, he sounded most engaged by the prospect of moving on. “I’ll find other charms,” he sang, and you believed him. (Was that the case when Barbra Streisand recorded the song? Tony Bennett?)

Mr. Cole has a new album, “The Dreamer in Me” (HighNote), that presents a fine approximation of one of his nightclub sets. (It was recorded last year, around Valentine’s Day, at Dizzy’s Club Coca-Cola.) The album features a tenor saxophonist to good effect, and this week’s engagement was billed to include one too.

Instead Mr. Cole had strict accompaniment from his crisp working band, with the guitarist Randy Napoleon, the bassist Elias Bailey and the drummer Curtis Boyd. It was enough, especially when he was busy at the piano, kneading out block chords or dancing around the melody of a song.

One of the more insouciant tunes from the new album is Cole Porter's "You're Sensational," and Mr. Cole gave it just as much life here, especially during the bridge:

Making love

Is quite an art

What you require

Is the proper squire

To fire your heart

Singing in his husky baritone, with the faintest shiver of vibrato, Mr. Cole kept these lines from sounding cheeky. Or maybe he made them sound just cheeky enough.

Freddy Cole performs on Saturday at Jazz Standard, 116 East 27th Street, Manhattan, (212) 576-2232, and from Thursday through Aug. 9 at Blues Alley in Washington, bluesalley.com.