

Chicago Tribune

That sound you hear is Monique soaring

By Howard Reich
Tribune Arts Critic
Published March 26, 2007

Over the weekend, a potentially important musical career took flight.

For although singer Typhanie Monique has been performing for several years in Chicago clubs, the show she played Friday night at the Green Mill Jazz Club pointed to an artist on the verge of a breakthrough. Playing a series of gorgeous duets with her longtime collaborator, guitarist Neal Alger, as well as several high-powered works fronting a quartet, Monique excelled as scat singer, improviser and ultra-savvy song interpreter.



This came as something of a surprise after her opening piece -- a somewhat exaggerated, self-consciously artful reading of Billie Holiday's "God Bless the Child." The distended phrases and vocal mannerisms that Monique brought to the song did not augur well.

But then something happened. Monique burrowed into Thelonious Monk's "Straight, No Chaser," producing some of the most convincing and deeply felt scat singing any female vocalist is offering in Chicago these days. With each work after that, Monique showed increasing confidence and daring, as she whimsically invented lyrics, boldly abotaged backbeats and freely constructed fast-flying phrases that defied predictability.

In a funk-tinged version of "Caravan" -- which appears on Monique's and Alger's new CD, "In This Room" -- the singer invented ingenious melody lines that subtly incorporated the original.

No matter how fast and furiously she sang, however, she sacrificed not a whit of the distinctly gauzy, supple quality of her voice. With Alger, drummer Eric Montzka and the hyper-virtuoso guest bassist Tom Kennedy charging hard behind her, Monique's phrases quickly were airborne.

Some of her most remarkable work unfolded in original compositions. The way she restlessly changed tempo and tone throughout her "Smile" suggested a singer-songwriter of genuine originality. The midsection of this piece proved especially heady, as Monique unfurled one tonally luxuriant phrase after another.

In other works, she affirmed that not all of today's jazz singers are content to dwell on saccharine love songs. In an eclectic assortment of originals and covers, Monique applied top-notch jazz singing to poetic social commentary.

It would be difficult to overstate guitarist Alger's role, for he knows how to underscore Monique's lines at one moment, provide rhythmic and harmonic tension the next. The years Alger and Monique have performed together have paid off handsomely. Their best work may be ahead of them.

JAZZ

Monique has found her voice, and a door has opened wide

By Howard Reich
Tribune arts critic

April 15, 2007

At first glance, it looked like just another CD release party.

A Chicago jazz singer who has been playing the city's clubs for years was going to serenade friends and fans with music from her second recording.



But by the time Typhanie Monique launched into her second song, with guitarist Neal Alger playing poetically alongside her, practically everyone in the house fell silent -- in amazement. The creamy sound of her voice, the buoyancy of her scat singing and the utter freedom and ease of her improvisations made many listeners do double (or triple) takes.

Was this really the same singer who had been playing to little fanfare for years at Pops for Champagne, while customers focused on pricey liqueurs and highly caloric desserts?

And, if so, exactly when and where did Monique learn to sing like that?

On verge of taking off

Practically everything about Monique's indelible show at the Green Mill a few weeks ago -- except for an unpersuasive opening number -- suggested that a potentially major artist was taking

flight. In so doing, she left even her most enduring admirers scratching their heads.

"I never heard her like that," says Josh Richter, a noted Chicago recording engineer who happens to be Monique's fiance and, therefore, thought he knew everything there was to know about her music.

"I sit and listen to her practice all the time," Richter adds. "I hear all the little things she's working out. That night, I never heard any of those things she did before."

Adds Green Mill owner Dave Jemilo, who has heard and seen it all, "Typhanie killed" (high praise in the jazz vernacular, and from a source who does not dispense it liberally).

Even Monique acknowledges that she was not expecting lightning to strike on that evening, in that way.

"I certainly didn't plan it," says Monique, at 34, not exactly a musical neophyte. "I guess there are times in your life when you have these passages in life. I think a door opened that night."

And Monique soared through it. After opening tenuously, with a melodramatic version of Billie Holiday's "God Bless the Child," Monique took on Thelonious Monk's "Straight, No Chaser," inventing free-flying melody lines and whimsical, off-the-cuff lyrics that drew richly earned ovations. The scene recalled another

pivotal moment in modern-day Chicago jazz, when a then-unknown vocalist named Kurt Elling made his debut at the old Jazz Showcase (then in the Blackstone Hotel) in January 1994, bringing cheeky attitude and heady musical invention to the art of jazz singing.



Circuitous route

Monique hasn't quite reached that level of audacity or technical brilliance, and Elling lately appears to have retreated from it, leaving the field begging for accomplished vocalists willing to take chances.

Monique clearly ranks among them, though she certainly took a circuitous route to arrive at this critical point.

Growing up in Stevens Point., Wis., she says she was awakened to music as a 9-year-old attending a Lionel Richie/Tina Turner double bill. By 5th grade, Typhanie Monique Coller -- her birth name -- was singing in school productions, and in high school vocal ensembles she was

harmonizing to the music of Take 6 and Manhattan Transfer, both virtuoso organizations.

But she had taken only a few private voice lessons, leaving her ill-equipped to survive in the music department at Western Michigan University, in Kalamazoo, Mich., she says.

When she failed in voice, she thought her musical life was finished.

"It was crushing to my soul," she recalls. "That was probably the most devastating thing that ever has happened to me, so far."

Nevertheless, she regrouped and in the early 1990s headed to Elmhurst College, where the faculty recognized natural gifts that others had missed.

"When she would sing jazz -- even though she was at the younger stages at that point -- her note choices already were ahead of her years," says Doug Beach, a longtime Elmhurst College professor.

Adds Susan Moninger, another faculty member, "She had a way of bringing soul into her lyrics, and the quality of her voice was unique -- I would say it was smoky colored, or musky.

"But she came needing vocal technique, and that's what she got."

Total immersion

After graduating in 1995, she moved downtown, dropped the surname "Coller" and immersed herself in the city's far-flung music scene, working in a gospel group called Choral Thunder, funk-acid jazz outfits such as Jive Council and SUMO. For a while, she thought her own funk-rock band, Peking Turtle, was headed for the big time, having performed everywhere from the House of Blues to television's "Jenny Jones Show."

But the group disbanded after five years, in 2002, leading Monique to refocus on a music she had been singing on the side, all along: jazz.

By then, she already had been collaborating for years with Alger, one of the most sensitive and creative guitarists in a city filled with them, and their duo engagement at Pops for Champagne may have marked the real start of Monique's jazz career.

"When she had the funk band, Peking Turtle, she was belting a lot more, there wasn't as much finesse to her singing," Alger recalls.

"But when we were doing the duo stuff, that contributed to the softening of her sound. There was more nuance in there, and more taking chances in improvisation."

Yet even the duo's recording debut, "Intrinsic" (2004, on the BluJazz label) barely hints at Monique's recent blossoming as singer. Though earnest and musical, Monique on "Intrinsic"

often shows a wobble in her vibrato, a tentativeness in her scat singing and a tendency to borrow the well-known, swooping phrasings of Sarah Vaughan.

The new CD, "In This Room," dramatically shows how far Monique and Alger have come. For starters, Monique's scatting on "Caravan," which opens the recording, proves as nimble as it is expressive. Better still, the subtle range of tonal colors and utterly individual phrases Monique articulates in pop tunes, standards and originals show how much she has learned about controlling her voice and interpreting a song.

And though hard-core jazz listeners probably would have preferred to hear more of the high-flying improv she brings to "Caravan," it's easy to get lost in the luster of her sound.

That said, however, even the new recording does not capture the level of work Monique now clearly is capable of achieving live, in front of an audience. But the wide airplay that "In This Room" has received has made the Monique-Alger duo an increasingly popular attraction on the road, where they are right now, touring jazz joints from Dubuque to Manhattan. Come Labor Day Weekend, Monique will play for the first time at the Chicago Jazz Festival, in Grant Park.

That's a long way from Peking Turtle. In effect, Monique has bucked convention by switching from pop-music idioms to the decidedly more rarefied milieu of jazz.

Why court a smaller, far less commercial audience?

"It was about my age, and my maturity," Monique says.

Adds Richter, the recording engineer, "Jazz is her calling. I think it's what she was meant to sing."

- - -

On CD

*Typhanie Monique & Neal Alger: "Intrinsic" (BluJazz), 2004.

*Typhanie Monique & Neal Alger: "In This Room" (Tyme Records), 2007.

Both CDs available at www.tymoneal.com.

hreich@tribune.com

Copyright © 2007, [Chicago Tribune](#)