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A Freewheeling Chanteuse You Can't Pin Down



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

In the spirit of Nina Simone: Barb Jungr at the Metropolitan Room.

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To describe the mesmerizing British entertainer Barb Jungr as a cabaret singer would be as simplistic as calling Bob Dylan a folkie. A 54-year-old blonde with a raucous laugh and a goofy grin who blushes easily, Ms. Jungr is an enthusiastic bohemian adventurer whose new show, which opens Thursday night at the Metropolitan Room, explores the music of Nina Simone.

In choosing songs Ms. Jungr, who will be accompanied on piano and accordion by Charlie Giordano, has the same freewheeling taste as Simone, who died five years ago. "What I love about her is that she never cared where the songs came from," Ms. Jungr said last week in an interview. "She understood that there are no borders in this world of music. Those categories are invented by record companies."

Like Simone's complicated musical sensibility, hers transcends geographic as well as stylistic boundaries. On one hand, she is a gregarious stage personality with a comic streak in the tradition of the English music hall legend Gracie Fields, who like Ms. Jungr was born in the north English mill town of Rochdale, near Manchester. On the other, she is a dramatic chanteuse schooled in Brecht-Weill and Jacques Brel. She has commissioned translations of a handful of Brel songs that emphasize what she calls his visceral side.

She is an avid devotee of Mr. Dylan and Elvis Presley, each of whom has inspired a personal tribute album, as well as a world music aficionado with a master's degree in ethnomusicology who has conducted workshops in several African countries. Her New York following is not a stereotypical cabaret audience of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley nostalgists but closer to the mature rock audience for performers like Randy Newman or Leonard Cohen.

She is a wonderful comic storyteller too. A typical show is a series of emotional hairpin turns with spontaneous patter that can break you up laughing. In the next moment you may find yourself choking back tears.

Simone belongs to a small circle of Ms. Jungr's singing idols that includes Dinah Washington, Sam Cooke, Marvin Gaye and Maria Callas, singers who in her words "open their veins for you and have voices that resonate with your whole body."

In Ms. Jungr's renditions of Dylan and Presley songs she never refers to the original versions.

www.barbjungr.com

They are so fresh they stand completely apart. Until you've heard her take on "Heartbreak Hotel," sung slowly without rockabilly mannerisms, you haven't really heard it.

Ms. Jungr reflected on Simone's notorious cantankerousness and the fierce anger that sometimes drove her to walk off the stage in the middle of performances.

"I come from a different generation and a different place, but there's something about anger that powerful that I find inspiring," she said. "It's the opposite of the show must go on. The attitude is, 'I'm so angry I don't give a damn if I lose everything.'"

Ms. Jungr said that although she didn't share Simone's anger, her father, a Czech who was interned in German work camps during World War II, had the same kind of "rage against the machine."

"Years later I was teaching Brecht to these unruly 18-year-old boys," she recalled. "And I told them, 'When my dad was your age, there was a knock on the door one night and soldiers came and took him to a work camp where he was starved and had to do things that if you didn't do them you were shot.'"

Ms. Jungr paused. "From that moment on, my 18-year-old boys behaved."

Her parents met when they were refugees in England. Her father became a chemical engineer and her mother a nurse.

In the mid-1970s she moved to London, became part of the alternative cabaret circuit and formed the Three Courgettes, a vocal trio that sang breakneck versions of gospel songs. When they broke up, she and her fellow member Michael Parker became the singing and songwriting duo Jungr and Parker, who performed on the folk club circuit for 12 years. Under the auspices of the British Council they began touring in Africa in 1991, giving workshops in Malawi, Sudan, Tanzania and Cameroon.

"The people would come with guitars made out of bicycle wires and string, and we would talk about music and songs," she recalled. "In Cameroon we played right out in the bush."

Her solo career began taking shape in the late 1990s, when she decided to go in a more theatrical direction, giving thematic shows. All of her recent albums, including a Simone tribute, "Just Like a Woman (Hymn to Nina)" are on Linn Records, a small label based in Glasgow.

As her career has ascended, Ms. Jungr has endured a series of personal tragedies. In the space of eight years Ms. Jungr, who comes from a very close-knit family, has lost her two younger sisters, her father, a husband from whom she was divorced, and her longtime accompanist, Russell Churney.

"You talk about kinds of death, and I will probably have experienced them," she reflected. "I have friends who compare me to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross."

If Ms. Jungr is emotionally raw, she is not self-pitying. She is the same in conversation as she is onstage: vulnerable, openhearted, funny and life loving.

"Performing is what works for me," she said. "It's what gets me through. I don't think people need to hear any of this, but they can hear it in my voice. They can tell."

Barb Jungr performs through Sept. 20 at the Metropolitan Room, 34 West 22nd Street, Flatiron district; (212) 206-0440, metropolitanroom.com.

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