



CAUGHT IN THE ACT

THE TIERNEY SUTTON BAND

The Iridium, New York, NY

August 19-23, 2009

By Joe Lang

Over the past several years, I have seen The Tierney Sutton Band several times, and never cease to be amazed at their cohesion and creativity. Now in their fifteenth year of collaboration, vocalist Tierney Sutton, pianist Christian Jacob, bassist Kevin Axt and drummer Ray Brinker are a lot more than a vocalist with a backing trio. They have an organic feeling that you usually find only in instrumental groups. Yes, Sutton is out front as the nominal center of attention, and as the spokesperson, but at the end of an evening of listening to them, you cannot isolate her vocalizing from the intricate complimentary work of the three fabulous musicians who are part of the this team without shortchanging what they have achieved.

For their five days at The Iridium, Sutton assured the audience that they would be changing the set list throughout the engagement, giving repeat attendees a fresh show each time. On Thursday evening August 20, each of their two sets was completely different, and equally stimulating to the ears of those present. They drew the selections for this evening from five of their eight albums, plus one from a guest appearance that Sutton made on an album under the leadership of Jacob.

Since most of the albums have had a theme, this gave the programs for the two sets a lot of diversity. They leaned most heavily on songs from their last three albums, *I'm with the Band*, recorded at Birdland, *On the Other Side*, the highly acclaimed collection that explored the theme of happiness from many angles, and their current release, *Desire*, an exploration of the romantic and material aspects of relationships, and the effects that these have on desire. They also visited more briefly, *Dancing in the Dark*, inspired by the vocal artistry of Frank Sinatra, *Something Cool*, their third album, and *Styne & Mine* Jacob's salute to composer Jule Styne.

One constant in the arrangements throughout their book, is the unique way in which they reconceive songs. With few exceptions, you are hearing songs that are familiar to you, but in ways that you have never heard them by any other artists. According to Sutton, each arrangement is a group effort, with one of them kicking things off with the idea for a song, and a concept that becomes refined by a lot of give and take among the members of the band. Even though they finally arrive at a set arrangement, their performances have a spontaneity that results from the subtle evolution that takes place with the continued playing of each selection. This factor plus the commitment of each of the musicians to the music makes each song sound fresh, no matter how many times you have heard them performed by the band on previous occasions.

Sutton has a flexible voice that often goes to surprising places. At times it has lovely purity, and at others it jolts you with a harsher and sometimes more nasal sound, but whatever the sound, it

always feels appropriate to the moment. She includes a lot of wordless vocalizing, but she does not scat, rather adds vocal colors in the way that an instrumentalist does. While there is a lot of musical adventurism taking place in her singing, she still maintains contact with the essence of the lyrics. When she sings a ballad like “I Fall in Love Too Easily” or “If I Loved You,” with directness, she infuses the lyrics with deep emotion and understanding. Her physical beauty, gestures and facial expressions add a dimension to her in live performances that is missing on her recordings, and this is not meant to slight her fine recorded output.

The cats playing the other instruments are important elements in making The Tierney Sutton Band so special. Jacob has an imagination and facility that places him in the front rank of jazz pianists. Like most outstanding jazz musicians, he seems to hear things a bit differently than most others, and is able to translate his unique conceptions into a series of moments of musical magic. Axt and Brinker often create a tension in the arrangements that is exhilarating for the listener. Axt is extremely facile, and provides a pulse to each number that keeps you constantly engaged. Brinker is a painter of sonic canvases, explosive at times, and delicate at others, that provide the backdrop for the creativity of his partners.

Then there are the songs. Both sets contained eleven selections, with a three song medley included in each. Early in the first set, they played three selections from *My Fair Lady*, “Wouldn’t It Be Lovely,” “I’ve Grown Accustomed to His Face” and “Show Me,” with a clever wordless interpolation of the hip tune “Better Than Anything” finding its way into the mix. The second set ended with an Irving Berlin medley consisting of “Let’s Face the Music and Dance,” “Cheek to Cheek” and “Blue Skies,” each of which received a reading that made you see them in a new light.

Their take on “Reflections,” a lovely composition by Duke Ellington with lyrics by Marjorie Houseman and Milt Raskin was memorable. The juxtaposition of an intense “Sometimes I’m Happy,” where Jacob sat out while Axt and Brinker joined Sutton to create the kind of musical tension alluded to earlier, with the following straight ahead version of “If I Loved You” by Sutton and Jacob perfectly demonstrated the eclecticism of the band.

As might be expected from a band with a recent release, they included six of the eleven selections from *Desire* during the evening’s proceedings. During the first set they performed two highly contrasting songs, the delicate Dave Frishberg/Alan Broadbent song “Heart’s Desire,” with the sole accompaniment of Jacob, and the sultry “Whatever Lola Wants.” They broke up these selections with a breakneck “S Wonderful,” performed by Sutton, Axt and Brinker as they did it on their live Birdland disc. This set concluded with a passionate “It’s All Right With Me,” and a somewhat mystical reading of “It’s Only a Paper Moon” that was prefaced by a reading from a Bahá’i prayer. “Love Me or Leave Me” and “My Heart Belongs to Daddy” were performed in the second set.

The Tierney Sutton Band demands a lot from the imagination and intelligence of their audiences. In return, they provide a scintillating evening of song, nicely enhanced by Sutton’s often witty and always engaging commentary.

Bahá'í World News Service - Bahá'í International Community (/)

Jazz singer Tierney Sutton takes a spiritual look at 'Desire'

14 June 2009

LOS ANGELES — Tierney Sutton is hardly alone among jazz vocalists in trying to bring a spiritual dimension to her music. But lining up jazz standards with the sacred writings of the Baha'i Faith takes the idea a step further, says Britain's Daily Express in a review of her new album.

The disc, called "Desire," features 11 well-known songs and has been garnering rave reviews since its release earlier this year. The first and last tracks – "It's Only a Paper Moon" and "Skylark" – are introduced by spoken extracts from *The Hidden Words*, a work by Baha'u'llah that states spiritual truths common to religion throughout the ages.



[\(/multimedia/slideshow.php?storyid=718\)](/multimedia/slideshow.php?storyid=718)

[Tierney Sutton has just released her eighth album. Two of the tracks include passages from "The Hidden Words" of Baha'u'llah.](#)

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Ms. Sutton's new album – her eighth – "comes across as a powerful, even spiritual, musical statement about the nature of human desire, both good and bad," says one online review.

"Material things that we want or desire are not usually a path to happiness," Ms. Sutton explains, "and are not usually a path to ourselves."

A member of the Baha'i Faith since the age of 18, she has emerged as one of the outstanding jazz singers of the past decade – "a serious jazz artist who takes the whole enterprise to another level," said the New York Times at one point.

Ms. Sutton, whose previous two albums each won Grammy nominations, says she has wanted for years to do a record challenging the modern tendency to exalt material wealth and self-gratification over humanity's higher, spiritual nature. Finally, the time was right.

The key, she said, is the 15-year relationship she has with her band – Christian Jacob on piano, Trey Henry and Kevin Axt on bass, and Ray Brinker on drums – and the way the five have learned to work together and with the music.

"I wouldn't have set about doing this in the first years that our band was together," Ms. Sutton says. "We are

a collective and make all our decisions collectively. As time went by, we were all craving to get deeper – both musically and conceptually. We'd reached a place where we were all very comfortable about doing this."

Sacred writings

As she began work on the album, she set about exploring the literature of the world's religions to find relevant extracts to use.

"My 12-year-old son and I have held an interfaith children's class for the last six or seven years, so I had all the books from the different traditions to go to," she says. "I read through all of them looking for texts about materialism. Of course, all faith traditions speak of this but in the end, I found that Baha'u'llah's writings seemed to be the most direct and concise in terms of materialism.

"In the course of researching this album, my understanding of the Hidden Words changed, and I now see the core issue of the book as humanity's struggle between its spiritual nature and materialism."

It took her many years to consider her work as a singer as a form of service to others.

"There are deep prejudices in our society about the usefulness of artists," says Ms. Sutton, who grew up in Milwaukee in the central United States and now lives in Los Angeles. "I first set out to study Russian because I thought I would be able to serve humanity with it."

In the process of pursuing a bachelor's degree in Russian, she discovered jazz.

"I knew there was something spiritual there, but I couldn't see standing on a stage singing 'do-be-do' as service," she remembers. "Then, after about 10 years, we started to get reviews where the critic could catch in our performances something of what I was trying to convey as a Baha'i."

Following one of her shows, a New York Times' review said she "conveyed a sense of jazz singing as an extension of spiritual meditation in which adherence to an ideal of balance and consistency and, yes, humility took precedence over any technical or emotional grandstanding."

Letters from listeners began to confirm her in the idea of service.

"One man wrote to me and said our concert had given him his first experience of joy since his 20-year-old son had died the year before," she says. "Another email came from a man who was thinking of taking his own life. He heard one of our songs on the radio and came to our concert that night, and he changed his mind."

Finding harmony

Ms. Sutton says she sees her voice as just another instrument in the ensemble. The band is incorporated, with each member an equal partner in the finances.

"Look at the state of art and music in the world. It's in a very sorry state. I see people changed by listening to the level of excellence in this band," she says.

"We want to offer our experience as a model to corporations and all sorts of organizations who struggle with

problem solving. We are inspired by a true process of consultation. When we set out to make a song, one person puts out an idea and the others contribute theirs. We all know each other extremely well. We have different styles, strengths and weaknesses," she notes.

"We can only do what we do if we remain united. Unity changes the way you do everything. And when we are onstage we always need to have a deep and profound sense of humility. We are there to serve the music."

Ms. Sutton is one in a line of accomplished jazz musicians who have been inspired by the Baha'i teachings, most notably Dizzy Gillespie, one of the 20th century's foremost trumpeters. She believes that there are parallels between the way that jazz works and concepts found in the Baha'i Faith.

"Despite what people think, jazz is not a kind of music without rules," she says, "but its rules create a structure that inspires diverse expression. In the band, we all trust each other to follow certain rules. Likewise, the diversity and the variation of individual Baha'i experience are vast and personally directed in many ways, but there are core values or principles guiding it."

When she saw the beautiful gardens and terraces of the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa, Israel, she says she found herself thinking about some of the solos by Christian Jacob, the pianist in her band.

"There was intricacy and beauty and great variation, but all in harmony. That's very much in the tradition of the best jazz."

The New York Times

MUSIC REVIEW | TIERNEY SUTTON

Songs in the Key of G, for Greedy

By [STEPHEN HOLDEN](#)

Published: March 20, 2009

Meditations on materialism: on Wednesday evening that was the jazz singer Tierney Sutton's description of the concept behind her newest album, "Desire" (Telarc), from which she performed six numbers at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola.



As Ms. Sutton and her excellent longtime band — Christian Jacob (piano), Kevin Axt (bass) and Ray Brinker (drums) — turned songs of avarice and power-mongering, like “My Heart Belongs to Daddy” and “Whatever Lola Wants,” into miniature jazz suites, her usually sweet singing acquired delicate bite.

Indignation and sarcasm don't come easily to Ms. Sutton, for whom jazz singing is a platform for her and her musicians to explore standards in a dreamy style that is notable for the absence of raw aggression. The closest she came was in a percussive, playfully defiant “The Lady Is a Tramp,” sung in the first person.

Elsewhere, songs composed in major keys were often reharmonized to sound unmoored. A typical number began with a section of prayerful, nonverbal vocalizing that slid into a song treated as a tone poem blocked into sections through which Ms. Sutton's voice wove smoothly in and out.

Texturally, the band favors a quasi-European-Asian fusion in the mode of “Caravan.” Each number is a carefully planned excursion into exotic but comfortable territory, in which Ms. Sutton's staccato vocal phrases tap dance on

Mr. Brinker's dense fields of percussion.

An especially telling song pairing found "Then I'll Be Tired of You," a declaration of eternal rapture, followed by the vengeful "Cry Me a River," to which Ms. Sutton applied minimal bitterness. Even here, rage seemed neutralized by an underlying spiritual centeredness.

Sometimes a simple deletion altered the meaning of a song. By ending the phrase, "It wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me" on the word "believed," "It's Only a Paper Moon" assumed a religious aura that supported its arrangement into a floating musical trance sung while gazing into the heavens. In this meditation on materialism, the money part was a distant mirage.

Tierney Sutton performs through Sunday at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, Frederick P. Rose Hall, Jazz at Lincoln Center, 60th Street and Broadway; (212) 258-9595, jalc.org

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MUSIC REVIEW | TIERNEY SUTTON

When Happy Songs Are Suspect, No Cheerful Tune Is Safe

By [STEPHEN HOLDEN](#)

“What really makes us happy is when the Wicked Witch dies,” the jazz singer Tierney Sutton observed in her introduction to “Ding-Dong! The Witch Is Dead” on Thursday evening at Birdland. Musing about the guilty pleasure of *schadenfreude*, Ms. Sutton and her band (Ray Brinker on drums, Kevin Axt on bass and Christian Jacob on piano) made the crowing victory song from “The Wizard of Oz” the concluding chapter of a show that was a sequence of biting musical essays on happiness, or the lack thereof.

Its basic thesis was that we Americans are so drunk on the pursuit of happiness that we can’t see what is in front of our eyes. That concept drives Ms. Sutton’s recent album, “On the Other Side” (Telarc), seven of whose songs she and the band performed at Thursday’s early show. The album takes its title from the lyrics of “Get Happy,” her version of which, driven by a funereal drumbeat, conveys a mounting apocalyptic presentiment.

Each song was scrutinized for its truthfulness and in one way or another eviscerated. “You Are My Sunshine,” taken slowly in a minor key, brought out the anxiety and heartbreak in a ditty that is often treated as a moronic campfire singalong. Ms. Sutton introduced “Sometimes I’m Happy” as a “kind of optimistic” song that “tells the truth about love,” and delivered a tart, dry-eyed reading that emphasized the co-dependent aspect of having a “disposition” “depends on you.” And “Happy Days Are Here Again” became a frantic, self-hyping burst of euphoria.

Blond and blue-eyed, with a voice as pure and sparkling as mountain spring water, Ms. Sutton is an unlikely bearer of sobering news. But the disparity between her appearance and her skepticism works. Every number in the show became an intense rhythmically tricky conversation between the singer and her musicians, whose solos amplified the ideas without tumbling into exhibitionism.

Ms. Sutton and the rhythm section have refined a staccato style of interaction in which her voice gets stuck on repeated syllables that are echoed in the bass and drums, while Mr. Jacobs’s European style of classical jazz piano lends the music a sweeping emotional range. Minute detail and conceptual audacity meshed seamlessly.