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By: Howard Reich - Columnist

Sparks Fly when “Ella Meets Mel”

If singers Johnny Rodgers and Ellen Winters were paid by the note for their “Ella Meets Mel” concert, they’d be zillionaires.

Yes, there’s a tidal wave of scat singing in the show, as one would expect of a tribute to Ella Fitzgerald and Mel Torme, two of the greatest vocal-jazz improvisers of the 20th century. When Fitzgerald and Torme sang – occasionally together – they proved that the human voice can match or exceed technical feats typically associated with musical instruments.

So it takes a certain degree of audacity for anyone to build an entire evening on the work of these two legends, for no female vocalist has yet approached Fitzgerald’s mercurial virtuosity nor has any male singer matched Torme’s luscious, supple way with a phrase.

But despite the title of the production, which opened Friday night at Davenport’s, “Ella Meets Mel” isn’t so much an evocation of the masters’ work as a heartfelt response to it. Neither Rodgers nor Winters, after all, is foolhardy enough to try and mimic the technical and artistic achievements of their musical idols. Instead, Rodgers and Winters showed their abiding affection and admiration for Fitzgerald and Torme, in both song and patter.

As it happened, Winters more closely suggested the work of Fitzgerald than Rodgers did of Torme, simply because of the nature of their voices. Winters’ vocal range and tone colors in some instances recalled Fitzgerald’s singing, while Rodgers produced a more throaty sound than anything in Torme’s musical vocabulary.

So, when Winters launched into “You’ll Have To Swing It (Mr. Paganini),” the dusky quality of her opening tones and the swooping phrasings that followed spoke unmistakably of how much Fitzgerald has influenced her singing. Much more striking, though, was the nature of the

interpretation itself, Winters finessing scat passages with apparent ease and bringing palpable

drama to the big finale, when she cut the tempo in half.

Rodgers, on the other hand, sounded thoroughly like Rodgers, big and brassy in “Give Me The Simple Life,” searing in expression in Torme’s “Born To Be Blue.” That tune represented a high point for Rodgers, the singer sustaining a slow but inexorable climax that attested to the vocal control and interpretive depth of his best work.

Of course, the performers offered several duet passages, a complex enterprise considering the cascades of notes involved. Notwithstanding a few minor missed cues in a show receiving its premiere, they finessed the proceedings quite well, with nimble accompaniment from pianist Sam Steffke, bassist Jim Cox and drummer Phil Gratteau. The tours de force arrived in a medley of tunes Fitzgerald and Torme had sung on TV on “The Gary Moore Show” and in a freewheeling re-creation of the indelible moment when the two riffed freely on the Grammy Awards in 1976, each an occasion for high-flying vocal pyrotechnics.

One of the chief joys of this evening, however, had nothing to do with Fitzgerald or Torme but focused instead on Rodgers.



Ellen Winters

The man’s versatility is well-known, and when he works the front room at Davenport’s and other spots in Chicago, listeners hear his finesse in swing, Broadway, pop, country and other genres. As singer and pianist, Rodgers seems equipped to handle anything that’s thrown at him.

But in “Ella Meets Mel” we get to hear him dig deeply into jazz facets of his musical persona, and that’s a feast. His buoyant scat singing in a transcription of Torme’s recording of “Lullaby of Birdland” reaffirmed Rodgers’ affinity for this idiom; the singer’s expression of childlike wonder in “Dat Dere,” with lyrics famously written by Chicagoan Oscar Brown Jr., showed Rodgers’ depth of characterization.

Winters, who’s introducing herself to Chicago audiences with this show, acquitted herself handsomely in extremely challenging repertoire, though a little more rhythmic drive (not speed but swing) would make her still more effective.

Ultimately, though, “Ella Meets Mel” has just begun its life, with Rodgers and Winters clearly equipped to expand and polish this show. As they do, perhaps a new wave of listeners will come to discover the joys of Fitzgerald and Torme, two signature artists whose influence still reverberates.

Howard Reich is a Chicago Tribune critic.