

THE AUSTRALIAN

Charenée Wade: Offering to Extend Tradition



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ERIC MYERS

Many jazz buffs are still dining out on the immortal works of the great, but deceased, African American singers. Why not? Given the reissue industry, there is still much to choose from and to discover. Still, Sarah Vaughan died in 1990, Ella Fitzgerald in 1996, Betty Carter in 1998. Where is the new generation of female singers who can, in the flesh, emulate those great artists?

Enter Charenée Wade, a New Yorker who has been making her way through the labyrinth of American jazz networks for more than 20 years. This week she is in Australia for the first time, for the Perth International Jazz Festival and the Sydney Women's International Jazz Festival.

Wade has ample credentials: education at LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts (known as the *Fame* school), where she received

classical training as an opera singer; a music degree at Manhattan School of Music; runner-up in the 2010 Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz International Vocals Competition; and the endorsement of Wynton Marsalis, who regularly features her in Jazz at Lincoln Centre projects.

Along the way, critical acclaim has been abundant. In 2015, critic Nate Chinen described her in *The New York Times* as “an heir to the legacies of Betty Carter and Carmen McRae”.

Wade released her first album, *Love Walked In*, in 2011 but came to serious notice only with her celebrated 2015 album, *Offering: The Music of Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson*. This was her tribute to influential novelist, poet and musician Scott-Heron, a cult figure often referred to as the godfather of rap. Drawing on the traditions of blues, jazz and Harlem Renaissance poetics, he attacked injustice with unusual eloquence. He is probably best known for his 1970 spoken-word track *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, which many regard as one of the greatest pieces of political music put to tape.



Wade’s *Offering* was widely praised. London’s *Guardian* critic John Fordham applauded the first woman to devote an entire album to the work of Scott-Heron: “(She has) turned this tough call into a triumph of emotional empathy, intelligence and assured technique.”

“Utilising the lyrics and music of the gifted duo as a launching pad, (Wade) takes her innovative arrangements into another dimension, conveying the intended message with her singular and assertive vocal textures, evolving, while

honouring the spirit of the original source,” James Nadal wrote on allaboutjazz.com.

Wade’s performances in Australia will concentrate on the Scott-Heron music with which she is now indelibly associated.

“Gil Scott-Heron’s music is unapologetic about telling the truth, having compassion for the suffering of others and calls for justice where there is none,” Wade tells *The Australian*.

“He and Brian Jackson were activists through their music. They are as important as all the activists who fought for freedom for those who had none; they inspire people to believe they have a right to speak out against injustice. Gil had the audacity to tell the world about the circumstances of black people, and disenfranchised people in general, and the courage to do it unapologetically. When he did that, it wasn’t common or accepted or even safe to put that message out publicly. But he did it courageously, and I want my music to help tell his story.”



Gil Scott-Heron: his music is unapologetic about telling the truth... PHOTO CREDIT DAVID CORIO REDFERNIS

Wade considers herself a jazz artist but one who is interested in exploring all kinds of music. “My music definitely incorporates other idioms such as soul, funk and real R&B, but these idioms are all born from jazz. So they are all related. My intention is to follow in the footsteps of the greats — Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie and John Coltrane — who explored and incorporated other genres into their music.”

Wade will be accompanied by pianist Oscar Perez. Born in New York, the son of a Cuban immigrant father and a Colombian violinist mother, Perez shares with Wade an education at LaGuardia High and took his masters degree at Aaron Copland School of Music at City University of New York’s Queens College, where Wade was appointed a professor (jazz voice) in 2010.



Oscar Perez at the piano: he listens to every bend and turn and tells a story through his instrument...

“Oscar is a sensitive musician,” she says. “He listens to every bend and turn and tells a story through his instrument. He is a powerful player and I know that

whatever musical journey I decide to go on, on any particular day, he always has my back.”

American drummer and bandleader Terri Lyne Carrington, who has toured with Wade, is generous in her praise. “Charenée is carrying the torch for jazz vocals,” Carrington says. “She is a true musician, writes and arranges her music beautifully, and has a distinct sound that holds in her voice the best of past and present.”



Charenée Wade: a distinct sound that holds in her voice the best of past and present...

“She has a wonderful vocal style, delivers the story with presence and conviction, and possesses spot-on intonation - basically all the things needed to be a great vocalist. I love working with her because she always elevates whatever musical platform she’s in.”

Wade is well aware of the torch to which Carrington refers. The inspiration she derives from her illustrious predecessors is palpable. Take Betty Carter.

“Her arranging abilities and command of the band were so inspiring to me as a young artist,” says Wade. “Her stage presence and her delivery of any lyric were captivating. Her scatting ability was mind-boggling.”

Charenée Wade performs at the Perth International Jazz Festival on Sunday, then has two performances at the Sydney Women’s International Jazz Festival at Foundry 616 on November 15 and 16.