

SHARNY RUSSELL: A WOMAN OF EXQUISITE TASTE AND ARTISTRY

Review by Eric Myers

[This article was prompted by hearing Sharny Russell's album Comes A Time, and a subsequent live performance by Sharny at the 505 Club in Sydney, on March 30, 2017.]

This performance by the vocalist/pianist Sharny Russell at the 505 more or less recaptured the exquisite ambience of her newly-released CD *Comes a Time*. It was an impressive demonstration of a multi-talented artistry that, as far as I know, is unique in Australian jazz.



Sharny Russell at the piano: she could be one of the most important scat singers in the world...PHOTO CREDIT STEVE BARRETT

Occasionally leading figures in the Australian jazz community declare that, in this country, we have some of the best musicians in the world. Paul Grabowsky is reported to have described the Australians Scott Tinkler and Phil Slater as “the two most important trumpeters in the world”.

Sometimes this sort of comment can sound fatuous. But every Australian who travels the world listening to jazz, knows it's true. The catch is, of course, that those musicians are down here – Down Under - and are known only to us.

In the same spirit I could say that Sharny Russell is one of the most important scat singers in the world. Who knows? In some ways Sharny Russell is Australia's Diana Krall; they share some qualities. Both are splendid singers seated at the piano, whose styles are informed by a deep musicality. I believe that sort of musicality comes from knowledge of the piano keyboard inculcated at an early age. Both are capable of

measured, compact piano solos which are often very beautiful in their simplicity. Both work with fine musicians who can really play, and give those musicians ample solo space.

There the comparison falters. Compared to our home-grown artist, Diana Krall's talent is somewhat one-dimensional. Sharny Russell has gone on to master several techniques that are unknown to Diana Krall. Krall does not sing wordless vocals in unison with her own piano lines. Nor does Krall compose. When you're married to Elvis Costello, why bother?



The saxophonist Paul Cutlan: a formidable player in the Sharny Russell team, given a lot of solo space... PHOTO CREDIT DAVID MACCULLAGH

So, while the Australian effortlessly ticks all of Krall's boxes, Russell has much more going for her. In addition to instrumental musicianship, which is a given, we also have a composer, who writes the melodies, and the lyrics as well. Her experiences of life and love are there in the songs. The lyrics tend to be more literal than poetic, but they are a slice of life, and they resonate.

These compositions however are not just songs. They are formidable vehicles for showcasing Sharny's myriad talents. Sharny Russell attempts a lot – much more than most Australian jazz artists - and brings it off in exquisite fashion.

I met Sharny Russell for the first time at the 505. But I had heard her many years ago at the 1998 Bellingham Jazz Festival, where she was performing with her All Blue Trio.

This festival was stacked with leading jazz musicians from all over the country. But even in that company Sharny was a beacon of light.

I had never heard any of her recorded music until the CD *Comes a Time*, which was a revelation. If it's not a masterpiece, then it is at least a *tour de force*. Here is the multi-talented jazz artist on display.

What I write here is as much a review of the CD as it is of the 505 performance.

A word about scat singing: wordless vocals, or nonsense syllables sung to improvised melodies. In 1926 Louis Armstrong dropped his lyrics sheet while recording *Heebie Jeebies*. He had to continue singing into the mike; if he had bent over to pick up the sheet he would have ruined the recording, so he completed the track with a wordless vocal. Since then, many people have believed he invented scat singing. It's a myth - it was already in existence before that incident in Armstrong's career.



Louis Armstrong: there is a myth that he invented scat singing in 1926...

Any singer can attempt wordless vocals, and many do, but it takes some courage. I consider it the most difficult expression of creative skill in jazz. The singer is afforded enormous freedom to create: the melody, the vowels, the syllables - whatever sounds that come to mind. But this mode of expression also has considerable potential for error, for lapses in taste; and for being out-of-tune. Many jazz singers would be wise to leave it alone.

At this performance in the 505 Sharny Russell did most of the tunes on her *Comes A Time* CD, and some others in her repertoire. This was a convincing and effortless display of scat singing at the highest level. And she swings. And sings in tune. And is very hip.

There is a little more on her plate, however. Russell has moved on to the newer, and somewhat more refined, branch of scat singing: the scat line in unison with her own instrumental line, in this case on the piano.

This technique has been around since Slam Stewart hummed along with his own bass lines, and has been popularised more recently by the American guitarist George Benson. Benson has made an art form out of it. Many of his fans know him as a singer, but aficionados know that Benson was a brilliant jazz guitarist before emerging as a vocalist. His scat lines exemplify the jazz tradition. Sharny Russell, I believe, is in the same mould.



The left-handed guitarist Jeremy Sawkins: one of a number of formidable musicians accompanying Sharny Russell... PHOTO CREDIT DAVID MACCULLAGH

A word on the musicians who are on the *Comes A Time* album, and performed at the 505: Sally Cameron (background vocals), Paul Cutlan (saxophones, flute & clarinet), Jeremy Sawkins (guitar), Brendan Clarke (double bass) and Gordon Rytmeister (drums).



The bassist Brendan Clarke: another formidable musician featured with Sharny Russell... PHOTO CREDIT DAVID MACCULLAGH

This is a formidable team of leading Australian musicians, herded together by Sharny Russell. All their brilliance and professionalism, which contribute so much to the success of the album, were on display at the 505. With such musicians playing so beautifully, the 505 performance was packed with delightful solos.

Early in the 505 performance, there was some tension in the air. At the time, I put this down to a sound balance problem; I felt that Sharny's vocals and piano sound were a little too far back in the mix. The guitar, bass and drums were bullying the music. Such a minor imbalance can cause tension in a room. Or possibly there was some nervousness in the air, as the musicians warmed up, on the pathway to relaxation. Later I discovered that, before the performance, Sharny suffered from an unusual attack of acid reflux, a disconcerting condition which she felt inhibited her performance.

Still, by the time she got to her version of Ellington's *I'm Beginning To See The Light*, midway through the first set, the room was calm. The sound balance had come good, and the music was flowing naturally. I think Duke Ellington would not be unhappy with Sharny's recomposition of his well-known standard. Or, should I say "decomposition"? Only the lyrics and the bridge survive from the original, but the result is an agreeable one. It's the sort of track on an album that one looks forward to hearing again and again.



The drummer Gordon Rytmeister: another formidable musician...
PHOTO CREDIT BILL RISBY

Sharny showed how adept she is in virtually all time-feels: the Latin-jazz samba (*Calling Out My Name*; *Lara*); the gentle medium swing feel, with Gordon Rytmeister using brushes (*Colour Me*; *On Top of The World*); the hard swinging tune in four (*Never Goes Out Of Style*; *Set Yourself Free*); the gentle bossa nova (*I've Grown Accustomed To His Face*; *Flowers*); the slow tune in 12/8 (*The Key*).

Sharny also can handle the big ballad (the unusual Dimitri Tiomkin/Ned Washington standard *Wild Is The Wind*) and, in a startling composition - in the light of current

politics - she nails domestic violence (*Crossing The Line*). If you want more, the last track on *Comes A Time* is an unaccompanied scat solo on the changes of *Stella By Starlight*, which Sharny calls *Stella a Capella*. She tossed it off on her way out of the studio, after completing the rest of the album.



The team, after the gig (L-R) Jeremy Sawkins, Sally Cameron, Paul Cutlan, Sharny Russell, Brendan Clarke, Gordon Rytmeister... PHOTO CREDIT DAVID MACCULLAGH

Sharny Russell helps us celebrate life, love, music, jazz, composition, scat singing, instrumental brilliance. And that's not to mention the rich background vocals on her CDs, which were approximated judiciously at 505 by The Idea of North's Sally Cameron, as the one backing vocalist available. This is another part of Sharny's artistry; she inhabits pop territory with Quincy Jones-like taste.

Sharny attempts a lot – much more than most – and the fact that she brings it off so flawlessly is a wonder to behold. And so I say unto jazz fans around the country, wake up Australia. A quiet backwater in northern New South Wales has produced a major jazz artist. If Sharny Russell is not sabotaged by poor sound during her forthcoming Australian tour, I believe she will deliver.

SHARNY RUSSELL'S TOUR ITINERAY:

Fri 10th Mar, 7:30 pm, Brisbane Jazz Club, Brisbane
Thurs 30th Mar, 8pm, Venue 505, Sydney
Fri 5th May, 7:30pm, Bangalow Bowling club, Bangalow
Fri 19th May, 8pm, David Williamson Theatre, Prahran, Melbourne
Sat 20th May, 7:30pm, Utas Recital Hall, Hobart
Sun 11th June, 4pm Navy Club, Fremantle
Mon 12th June, 7:30pm, Ellington Jazz Club, Perth
Sun 2nd July, 2:30pm, Toowoomba, The Office
Sun 23rd July, 2pm, Adelaide, La Boheme
Sun 8th October, 2pm, Lismore Bowling Club

Media Enquiries: Sharny Russell Email: sharny@sharnyrussell.com