

THE AUSTRALIAN

Warm and intimate, festival's ideal start



In performance at Ruby's, L-R, Jonathan Zwartz (bass), Tim Firth (drums), Matt McMahon (electric piano), Virna Zanzone (vocals)... PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO...

JAZZ

Virna Sanzone

Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival

Ruby's, 3a Joynton Ave, Zetland

November 12

ERIC MYERS

On Friday night before a sell-out crowd, the splendid singer Virna Sanzone opened the tenth Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival. It was a memorable performance, and moreover a beautiful experience that prompted some significant realisations.

It underlined how fortunate the Sydney jazz audience is, to be able to hear such music of the highest excellence in civilised surroundings, and in a small audience context, which retains the intimate milieu where jazz has always felt most at home.

It was once thought that, to hear great jazz that warms the heart, one would need to be in overseas cities like New York or Paris. Such thoughts, now long gone, were deemed obsolete by Sanzone and the three outstanding musicians onstage: Matt McMahon (piano), Jonathan Zwartz (double bass) and Tim Firth (drums).

Zwartz, with years of experience to burn, has brought the art of jazz double bass to an immaculate standard. It was a joy to hear his improvisations articulated so well, with every note as clear as a bell. Zwartz is in the orbit of other superb local bassists Lloyd Swanton and Craig Scott. Whatever strategies these three world-class musicians have adopted over time to perfect their production of sound, the individuality possible in this art form has enabled all three to create completely differing sounds and styles, but which are equally valid.



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Similarly McMahon who, on electric piano, removed the need to adequately amplify an acoustic grand piano, a task which has long been problematic for local sound technicians. His brilliant solos cut through beautifully, epitomizing a maturity which, like Zwartz's, has been built up over years of engagement with jazz at the highest level.



Pianist Matt McMahon: epitomizing a maturity which has been built up over years of engagement with jazz at the highest level... PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO...

The music made us feel glad to be alive, but what of the star of the show?

Throughout Sanzone was in a warm comfort zone provided by the accompanying musicians. One of Australia's most versatile singers, with many strings to her bow, she can rightly claim to have something for everyone. Fundamental to her artistry however, is a unique voice quality which amplifies her jazz expertise. Sanzone presented a number of compositions in foreign languages, such as French and Italian. Without having to sell an English lyric here, this approach compels the audience to focus directly on one of her greatest strengths: her lush, full voice. Listeners are drawn in to luxuriate in its simple beauty.

As for repertoire, Sanzone nodded towards well-known standards, but with a touch of originality, to stretch conventional approaches: *You Don't Know What Love Is* (with drums only accompaniment); *I've Got The World On a String* (with bass only accompaniment); and *I Hear Music* (taken at breakneck speed).



Music of the highest excellence in civilised surroundings, L-R, Virna Sanzone, Tim Firth, Matt McMahon & Jonathan Zwartz... PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO...

Otherwise her repertoire was commendably intelligent and comprehensive, touching many bases. It included two rarely heard Horace Silver compositions, *Afro Blue* and *Senor Blues* and significantly, a number of moving ballads which were delivered with effortless grandeur, including the evergreen *You Don't Know Me*, now nearing immortality; and the unusual composition, once recorded by Nina Simone, *Wild is the Wind*.

The Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival continues daily this week in various venues up to the final concert at Foundry 616 on Sunday November 21, featuring the Zambian/British singer Major Zulu.