

THE AUSTRALIAN

Jazz Great Wilma Reading Still Has The Voice Of A Legend



Wilma Reading at the Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival ... PHOTO CREDIT ANTHONY BROWELL

MUSIC

Wilma Reading

Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival

Foundry 616, Ultimo

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ERIC MYERS

Opening the Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival on Saturday, Cairns singer Wilma Reading gave a stirring performance, built on her vast experience as a cabaret artist. It was a reminder of the relatively unknown fact that, in the

second half of the past century, she was one of the first indigenous Australians to scale international heights as an entertainer, following in the footsteps of her aunt, the extraordinary singer Georgia Lee.



Wilma Reading's aunt, singer Georgia Lee...

While some may know Reading as a purveyor of R&B, soul and funk, she chose here to present well-known standards and ballads, giving her ample opportunity to show those elements of her artistry which embrace jazz.

After decades of singing her voice is still rich and resonant, but she uses it sparingly. The success of her performance was built on her ability to warm up the room and sell a song. She displayed vocal histrionics only when she would occasionally raise the volume to a more operatic level, to give her lyrics maximum impact.



Duke Ellington (left) with Billy Strayhorn, who auditioned Wilma Reading...
PHOTO CREDIT DAVID REDFERN

Reading indulged in playful repartee with the backing musicians, occasionally dipped into scat singing, and told stories about her career. The only Australian to have performed with Duke Ellington's great orchestra, she was auditioned by Billy Strayhorn. He congratulated her for singing his composition *Lush Life* – said to be the most difficult song in jazz– as he wrote it. Ellington then offered her a job, which Reading turned down, as the money was not good enough. It's a great story.

An immaculate backing trio included Peter Locke (piano), Zoe Hauptmann (double bass) and Evan Mannell (drums). All three were given judicious solo space, with some of their instrumental sections featuring impressive four-bar breaks between piano and bass, the latter distinguished by Hauptmann's highly swinging style.



Pianist Peter Locke: part of an immaculate backing trio... PHOTO COURTESY COLBOURNE AVENUE

Highlights of Reading's performance were her ballads, such as *Stormy Weather* (illustrated by a story of meeting Lena Horne in Sweden); *The Way We Were* (where Reading was able to welcome family members who had travelled from afar to be present); and the great composition *When Sunny Gets Blue* (most of which she sang with only piano accompaniment).



A young Wilma Reading: in the past she conquered the international music world...

Leading music writer Tony Hillier has said that Reading in the past “conquered the international music world, from Las Vegas to London, from New York to Moscow”. A packed festival audience on Saturday was well able to savour the artistry that underpinned those legendary achievements.

The Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival continues until November 17.