

Another Delightful  
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## JAZZ

## A gifted West leads you in many musical directions

**Paula West**

Where: Firebird Cafe, 363 W. 46 St., Manhattan

When: 9 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 9 p.m. only, Tuesday-Thursday. Through May 15

How much: \$30 plus two-drink minimum; reservations required, call (212) 586-0244

**By George Kautzer**

STAR-LEDGER STAFF

NEW YORK -- In trying to conjure up a comparison to Paula West's voice, singers as diverse as Sarah Vaughan, Mabel Mercer and Lena Horne come to mind. West, who opened a three-week engagement at the Firebird Cafe Tuesday night, is a stunning hybrid of jazz, cabaret and classic pop.

When she sang "Fly Me to the Moon (in Other Words)" on opening night, West approached it like a jazz singer, beginning softly, wrapping her dark alto around the words to just Al Obidinski's bass, then adding more insistent rhythmic accents to a second chorus joined by pianist Ken Muir. By her third and fourth choruses, West was transforming the melody line into exuberant swing, adding emphatically rough, sandpaper edges to her tone.

To prove her jazz pedigree be-

yond doubt, West followed up that swinger with a "Caravan/Night in Tunisia Medley" that found her joining the two tunes as if they were Siamese twins, shifting gears between melodies, tempos and time signatures with the hip ease of a sporty synchro mesh transmission.

In those jazz contexts, West was wonderfully self-assured and vocally supple, and this San Francisco-based singer is just finding her wings as a jazz singer. When she breaks out of the cabaret setting of just piano/bass accompaniment and begins performing in jazz venues, she'll provide formidable competition to this generation's crop of female jazz singers.

Meanwhile, West is already head and shoulders above most of the competition on the cabaret circuit. She brings a sly, winking sexuality to Cole Porter's double-entendre patter song, "Nobody's Chasing Me," and is deliciously duplicitous in asserting "A Woman's Prerogative" (to change her mind) in that song by Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer. In those songs, and a fast, tropically infected "A Hundred Years from Today," West not only delivered the message musically but also lyrically, conveying every word with both clear diction and dramatic understanding.

A good benchmark for judging cabaret singers is depth and original-

ity of repertoire, and on that score West is pure sterling. Her show at the Firebird is a delightful and surprising mix of familiar standards and neglected gems, many of the latter by the giants of the classic American Popular Song. From Hoagy Carmichael she's unearthed "Bread and Gravy," while Irving Berlin's book yields "The Best Thing For You," a rollickingly optimistic love plea.

The real revelation, though, was another neglected gem from Cole Porter, the torchy ballad "Why Can't You Behave?" West invested the bel canto-like five-note melody of the repeated title line with incredible passion and pathos, all the while modulating and shaping the notes into a long legato line delivered without breath breaks. She made the song so captivating, it provoked thoughts of how wonderful it would also have sounded from a circa-1960 Miles Davis on muted trumpet.

West ended her set with two encores, a playfully swinging "You Came a Long Way from St. Louis" and "Restless," which is the title cut of her new, self-produced and distributed album. She's awailing a shipment of them from California later this week, when they will be available for sale at the Firebird -- more than enough reason to stop by, even if you can't catch a set by this hugely impressive and talented singer.



PHOTO BY WARREN S. WEST  
Paula West is head and shoulders above most of the competition on the cabaret circuit.