

Paula West at home on a big stage

Singer dynamic, elegant
at Palace of Fine Arts

By Philip Elwood
CHRONICLE JAZZ CRITIC

Paula played the Palace on Friday — it was Paula West's night to shine, and shine she did. It was West's first appearance on the Palace of Fine Arts Theater's big stage and her first ever with full band and string quartet accompaniment.

This was an extravagant record-release concert that included all 14 selections from her new Hi-Horse CD (in the stores on Sept. 28), and she even received a proclamation from Mayor Willie Brown, delivered in person.

JAZZ

PAULA WEST will perform Sept. 8 at the Russian River Jazz Festival — call (707) 869-3940 for information — and Sept. 25-Oct. 20 at the Plush Room, 940 Sutter St. Call (415) 885-6800.

The buzz of excitement that circulated through the crowd of 500 before West's arrival onstage turned to applause, whoops and cheers as she sauntered to the mike, elegantly attired, and swung lightly into Johnny Mercer's mellow lyrics for "Day In, Day Out."

West's voice has enlarged in range and timbre over the years, enabling her to move — seemingly with ease — from her familiar luscious contralto to a strong, midrange soprano.

She takes the old pop song "Here Lies Love" (from an early-'30s "Big Broadcast" film) and makes it a classic torch song; she followed Billy Strayhorn's reflective, mournful "Lush Life," feathering her delivery beautifully, with the swinging "Them There Eyes" — a big crowd favorite.

The very biggest crowd response came for West's take on Oscar Brown Jr.'s "The Snake," a rap-like, change-of-key narrative piece that she seasons with savvy lyric inflection and some needed melodic lines.

Singing against the string bass of Bill Douglass (outstanding all night), West made Cy Coleman's tricky "You Fascinate Me So" into a cabaret classic,



Paula West
A big voice has gotten bigger

and in the midst of "Bye Bye Blackbird," with baritone saxist Ray Loeckle featured, she inserted a touch of Fats Waller's "Jitterbug Waltz."

Ken Muir's piano and Eddie Marshall's drums helped swing the Gershwins' "Looking for a Boy," but even with some glorious trumpet work by Allen Smith, the imaginative bracing of Juan Tizol's "Caravan" with Dizzy Gillespie's "Night in Tunisia" didn't have the sparkle onstage that it has on the disc.

West's first encore was the beautiful "I Remember You" arranged by Muir (who scored all the music) in the manner of George Shearing's memorable recording; earlier, her anthemic rendition of "Blues in the Night" deservedly brought down the house. Lyrics for both songs, again, by Mercer.

Other notable instrumental contributors to the concert's success were Noel Jewkes and Dave Tidball on woodwinds, Brad Bueth, guitar, and Jeremy Cohen, solo violin.

Friday's concert was repeated Saturday.

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