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Hard Swing With Wit and Allure

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

The jazz singer Paula West has one of those innately sensual voices that can't be cultivated ; you're either born with it or you're out of luck. And when she applies her thick, knotty contralto to a number like "The Snake," Oscar Brown Jr.'s cynical, erotic parable about a trusting woman who saves the life of a poisonous reptile that recovers only to turn around and bite her, Ms. West's vocal twists and turns coil mischievously around the lyric, squeezing out the last acid drop of knowingness.

"The Snake" isn't the only song by Mr. Brown in her new cabaret show, which plays through Nov. 16 at the Oak Room of the Algonquin Hotel. The program's opening number, "Mister Kicks," lurks in the same shadowy territory where evil slyly beckons.

Ms. West is backed by the Eric Reed Trio (Mr. Reed on piano, Barak Mori on bass and Rodney Green on drums), an ensemble whose lean, swinging arrangements adroitly serve the singer's unfussy style. While Ms. West isn't exactly a jazz minimalist, she doesn't waste any energy on frilly ornamentation. Her rhythmic drive comes from deep inside the body and never seems pasted on. Especially outstanding is her version of "Lover," which shimmies alluringly against sizzling, accelerated bass and drums.

The harder Ms. West swings, the more her tough, sophisticated sense of humor bursts out. And when the song is witty, like Ray Evans and Jay Livingston's "I Shoulda Quit When I Was Ahead," or Cole Porter's "Don't Fence Me In," and "It's De-Lovely" (updated to include references to Steven Spielberg

and Julia Roberts), Ms. West becomes a font of refreshing wisened-up merriment.