

The New York Times

CABARET

The Limits of Success And the Reason to Go On

Paula West
Oak Room

Near the end of her impressive opening-night show at the Oak Room of the Algonquin Hotel last week, Paula West, a San Francisco pop-jazz singer making her New York cabaret debut, was near tears as she quoted Ezra Pound to the effect that doing what you love is the only thing that matters, and the rest is dross. Although Ms. West has won acclaim in the Bay Area, where she has performed for seven years, she shyly admitted that she still had to work as a waitress to support herself.

An interpreter of taste and intelligence with a winsome, cuddly stage personality, Ms. West has a smooth, medium-size contralto that she wields with exceptional precision and control. Echoes of everyone from Lena Horne to Billie Holiday run through her singing, but she lacks Ms. Horne's dramatic hauteur and Holiday's intense vulnerability. Her approach to the popular standards that made up her program on Tuesday was alternately reflective and playful, but always even-tempered.

Holiday's "Don't Explain" was transformed from an an open wound into an expression of stoic resignation. A subdued, slowed-up rendition of "If I Only Had a Brain" turned the Scarecrow's bouncy signature song from "The Wizard of Oz" into a romantic torch song about losing one's perspective. "Temptation" seethed under a beguine beat supplied by her pianist, Ken Muir, and her bassist, Al Obidinski. "In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening" swung out invitingly.

Ms. West, who will be at the Oak Room through Saturday, could be a bit more aggressive, but she is still a real find. **STEPHEN HOLDEN**

DAILY NEWS



NEW TO NEW YORK: Paula West

S.F. Singer's Debut Is a Lovely Coup

With her smooth
voice, West heads
in right direction

By **HOWARD KISSEL**

Daily News Drama Critic

TOWARD THE END OF HER opening-night show at the Algonquin's Oak Room, San Francisco singer Paula West paused and said, "When I used to wait tables . . ."

She stopped, laughed and mentioned that she still waits tables and then went on.

I am not cause-oriented, but the thought that West will return to the Bay Area after next Saturday and resume waiting tables, is unthinkable.

She's too special.

You sense this right from the start, when she sings "The Simple Life" and "Always True to You in My Fashion" with understated but ingratiating irony.

Her voice is cool and smooth, but you're aware of lots of emotion simmering beneath the surface. The voice has a dusky shimmer that brings a tinge of melancholy to even the brightest numbers.

She has a wonderful stage presence, a smile that melts you with its suggestion of wry intelligence, a head wreathed in long, black curls, one of which occasionally drops over her face like a naughty girl who won't obey.

Her repertory ranges from a soulful version of "If I Only Had a Brain" to several songs associated with black singers of the past, which she performs with utter freshness, like "Tired," which Pearl Bailey used to do, and Billie Holliday's wrenching "Don't Explain."

West does a great version of Dave Frishberg's droll "Peel Me a Grape" and a sensuous but funny "Comes Love."

Her arrangements, by Ken Muir, a breathtaking pianist, are spare but exquisite. She also gets backup from bassist Al Obidinski.

West radiates a kind of innocence that, with time, will probably go, but she displays a radiance and a musicianship you know will only increase over the years.

I can't believe she'll be waiting tables much longer.