

## Taking on the jazz greats -- and doing it with grace

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Reviewers aren't supposed to talk too much about a performer's looks, but let's just get it out of the way: Jazz singer Paula West has a face that could someday make her one of the Great Ones.

That this San Francisco talent has the voice for entry into the pantheon has already been well established.

"I like great singers -- Ella, Sarah," said Eric Reed, the pianist and leader of the trio accompanying West on her five-week stand at the Plush Room. "(Paula's) right up there, as far as I'm concerned."

And he's not just sweet-talkin' the boss. West was in showoff mode (in a subtle way) right from the start, beginning Tuesday night's 80-minute set with a pair of really fun and insanely difficult songs. Antonio Carlos Jobim's "Waters of March" may have only three notes (more or less) but it's a waterfall of words, and West surfed it with head-tossing grace. The benchmark recording of the song is by the breathy Brazilian singer Astrud Gilberto, and West's earthy vitality invigorated this familiar ode to "the promise of spring." West followed that right up with a swingin', syncopated "Ragtime Cowboy Joe," another tongue-twistingly tricky vintage number that she made look easy.

Some voices are astringent like gin, some sweet like sherry. West has a red wine voice -- a deep, mellow Cabernet voice. And she's blessed with Ella-mentary precision and pitch control, too. With her vocal chops amply demonstrated at the Plush Room, West went for the heart on the evening's first ballad, a medley of "You Don't Know What Love Is" and "When Your Lover Has Gone." All creamy, elongated vowels, with a bit of pain-edged husk, it actually made a woman in the front row cry.

Everyone knows "Anything Goes," but West reanimated it not just with a galvanizing rhythmic re-emphasis, but with clever new lyrics that name-checked "reality shows" and the Hilton sisters "and their videos."

The evening's highlight was "Hazel's Hips," a tribute to a waitress by Oscar Brown Jr. "This one is normally sung by men ... but this is San Francisco, so you can do that here," West said. And she clearly had a ball, singing with carnal glee, "Yeah, but her hips bring the

tips."

West encored with another number by Brown, "The Snake," a retelling of the Eve and the serpent story, which West (with a little help from the lighting guy) made devilishly dramatic.

It's hard to imagine a more ideal trio for West than the orchestral Eric Reed Trio. Reed, formerly with Wynton Marsalis' band, plays a buoyant and vividly melodic piano -- on "Do Nothing 'Til You Hear From Me" he seemed to be making four hands' worth of chords. (He's a looker, too. He and West make quite a charismatic pair up there.) Inventive drummer Rodney Green used all parts and edges of his kit for color, and in "Brazil" conjured an entire samba band.

Just one thing stands between West and total command of the stage, and that's her between-songs stage patter. Tense and rushed, West relied on the cabaret-standard "Great American Songbook" composer trivia, while the audience seemed hungry for a bit of ease and intimacy.

But suddenly she's singing again, and this very minor quibble is forgotten. West may simply be more comfortable singing, and that's part of her considerable charm.

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Paula West with the Eric Reed Trio. \$25-30. Through Feb. 15 at the Plush Room at the York Hotel, 940 Sutter St., San Francisco; (415) 885-2800, [www.plushroom.com](http://www.plushroom.com).

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