

Time Out New York

MUSIC

Interview

West of both worlds

Can singer Paula West navigate the waters between jazz and cabaret?

By K. Leander Williams

If appearances are what count, Paula West would seem to be near the top of the cabaret world. The San Francisco-based singer may have only quit waiting tables a year ago, but she was already working at the FireBird Cafe, one of NYC's swankiest cabaret rooms, as regularly as any promising out-of-towner could hope to. On top of that, the superb *Come What May*, West's latest self-produced collection of classic songs (her third), is winning a ream of critical raves, and it seems poised to sell significantly better than its predecessors.

So what could possibly be wrong with this picture? Well, for one, West is not really a cabaret singer: She may be the greatest jazz vocalist to emerge in the past decade. To be fair, working cabarets isn't really the problem; the audiences love her and she's a wonderfully generous performer. But West does cite wider ambitions. "I still don't have a manager," she says humbly, by phone, from her apartment in the Bay Area. "I've been lucky enough to get gigs in New York, but I don't



play the big-name jazz clubs or the JVC Jazz Festival; you need the kind of backing that Diana Krall and Jane Monheit have to do that. I've produced all my own records, so businesswise, I'm still kind of on my own."

It's hard to say why this is still the case, especially after three near-perfect discs in a row and a growing following on both coasts. The San Diego native made her first trip east for the annual Mabel Mercer Cabaret Convention in

1995, but even then, her jazz chops were apparent to everyone within earshot—well before West decided to fill her new album with special guest jazzers such as vibraphonist Bobby Hutcherson and pianist Bill Charlap, and before anyone had heard the arrangement (also on the new album) that allows her to seamlessly wed Duke Ellington's "Caravan" and Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia." Unlike many singers these days, West swings naturally, without placing any more emphasis on the beat than it takes to get a lyric across. She doesn't engage in hapless scat-

singing because her dark, beautiful contralto is much more effective bending a note than breaking it.

No small wonder that when she's asked if swapping her regular trio for the bop stars on *Come What May* made it her "jazz album," West teasingly shoots back another question. "Did you think the other [albums] were something else?" Of course, the perception that she's somehow changing her style still raises a dilemma. "Peoplesay that the jazz audience is small, but I think the number of cabaret fans is even smaller. I felt I needed to branch out a little on this one. My approach isn't necessarily different—though it's true that I might vary my repertoire slightly going from a cabaret to a jazz situation. I structured *Come What May* to get a little more attention from the jazz crowd."

But any doubt about the disc's continuity with her previous work

falls away instantly once you notice her *modus operandi*. West's immense skills aren't all that sets her discs apart from the pack; her taste does, too. You know you're in the presence of a real talent when unfamiliar songs work themselves into your memory, and every one of West's albums contain several long-overlooked gems that might save fans of the classic songbook from yet another version of, say, "You Don't Know What Love Is." Her debut, 1997's *Temptation*, brought out Carroll Coates's "You'll See." *Restless* (1999) uncovered Lionel Bart's "Who Will Buy?" For examples of the new record's finds, just check "You Fascinate Me So," a cool jaunt by Cy Coleman and Carolyn Leigh, and "The Snake," a chug-chugging parable by Oscar Brown Jr.

In the end, West's prowess and versatility ensure that she won't have to choose one audience over another. She moves into the Algonquin for five weeks starting Tuesday, and the length of the engagement brings up another not-often-cited reason for her tenure in cabaret rooms. "On one level, it's simply a practicality," she says. "Even if I could get booked into a famous club like Yoshi's in San Francisco, the most I could get would be three to four nights. I like the idea of going into the Algonquin or my home base out here, the Plush Room, and staying for weeks at a time. All kinds of music fans come in, and it makes for a really diverse crowd." If there's a better picture of success, we don't know what it is.

***Come What May* is out on HI Horse. Paula West participates in "The Irving Berlin Songbook" at Town Hall Sun 28; she plays the Oak Room at the Algonquin Tue 30-Dec 10.**