Women Singers of 1920s, '30s Celebrated in 'Speakeasy'

Bronwyn Rucker, Collaborating With Joe Franklin, Pays Tribute to the Era



Bronwyn Rucker is seen on her CD album cover *Bright Blue*, featuring songs such as "Dream a Little Dream of Me," "Misty," "Pennies from Heaven," "Blue Skies" and "Stardust."

By Harold Egeln
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BROOKLYN — "When the red, red robin comes bob, bob, bobbin' along" had the audience singing along in the spirit of female singers of the 1920s and 1930s who made their mark in speakeasies, as cabaret star Bronwyn Rucker brought back that era in her latest show. Her nearly two-hour-long uplifting performance to a packed house was aglow with heart-filled vibrancy, joy, passion, humor, pathos and show-biz history.

The venue for her tenderly charming and elan-charged engaging tribute show "Speakeasy…Shhhhh…" in collaboration with the legendary Joe Franklin, was Don't Tell Mama on Manhattan's Restaurant Row. The show was directed by the award-winning Jay Rogers.

"She's another Rosemary Clooney," said Franklin, who wrote the show's book with Ms. Rucker, who hails from Brooklyn. Franklin, whose long era on television and radio stretched from around 1950 into this new century, personally knew some of the era's singers and had them as

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guests on his TV program.

Evoking Helen Morgan, Billie Holiday, Sophie Tucker and Kate Smith, among other well-known and lesser-known singers, Bronwyn made each come alive again with the songs they sang during the wild Prohibition era, ending with the speakeasies' demise during the Great Depression in 1933.

"What was the password phrase used to get into a speakeasy?" asked Bronwyn, looking at Joe Franklin, who replied smiling, "Joe sent me." (*Editor's note — one could also say "swordfish," the password used in the 1929 Marx Brothers movie, "The Coconuts."*) And the audience then entered through the door into the past with Bronwyn as their guide, with her gift of storytelling and singing in the style of the singers she described and the texture of their lives.

Making the speakeasy years all the more real were Jerry Scott on piano and Saadi Zain on bass in the intimate red brick backroom. Scott would add his own often spontaneous and sometimes funny commentary, adding to the close-to-the-heart, touch-the-audience talent that is a hallmark of Bronwyn's performances.

"When the 18th Amendment went into effect in 1920, speakeasies opened and thrived out of sight of the law," she said.

The speakeasy singers sang many popular songs that originated in a variety of Broadway venues, Ms. Rucker noted, which included musicals, "follies" and "gaieties." She began her show with Lorenz Hart and Richard Rogers' "Manhattan" from the 1925 musical "Garrick Gaieties."

Bronwyn's show repertoire also included favorites such as "I'll Get By," "Mood Indigo" and Blue Skies" and lesser-known songs such as "Poor Butterfly" and "Honey Bunch." When she sang "Tea for Two," I noticed Franklin tapping his fingers on the table, like dancers. When she ended her show with Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," she made Kate Smith, who made the song her anthem in the late 1930s, come alive again.

In the audience was Michael Block, son of radio pioneer Martin Block of "Make Believe Ballroom" fame, who was obviously thrilled with the performance, seated next to Franklin and jazz legend Ray Rivera.

Bronwyn, a Brooklyn resident, has produced several CD recordings including "Bright Blue" from 2004, produced by Rick Russo and Brian Gari, a noted songwriter who is Eddie Cantor's grandson, with liner notes by Joe Franklin; and "Radon Daughters – A Radioactive Musical" written with Woody Regan, her long-time collaborator, on Original Cast Records.

Of "Bright Blue," Franklin says in the CD's liner notes: "When you listen to Bronwyn, you feel she is in touch with her childhood memories. She evokes heartbreak and loneliness with a vocal artistry that, believe it or not, uplifts us rather than letting us feel heavy." Her 21 songs include "Dream a Little Dream of Me," "Pennies From Heaven" and "Stardust."

Two new CDs are now in production, one with famed jazz masters Billy Taylor and Ray Rivera, and the other titled "Speakeasy," which features songs and segues from her new show. In the early 1980s, Bronwyn was at the forefront of solo woman performance artists with her autobiographical "Subway Named Desire." She has appeared in movies with Mickey Rooney and Scott Baio and several soap operas in additional to theater productions in local and regional tours.

Bronwyn Rucker will give an encore performance of her new show on Monday, Oct. 27 at 7 p.m. Don't Tell Mama is located at 343 West 46th St. between Eighth and Ninth avenues. For reservations, call (212) 757-0788.