

eye Music

Singer/songwriter unites her two worlds

Kathy Kosins sings jazz — and paints — from the stage

By Andrew Gilbert
Correspondent

Some singers paint pictures with their voice. Kathy Kosins, a sultry jazz vocalist and award-winning songwriter steeped in R&B, also uses a brush and canvas.

The Detroit-based Kosins arrives in the Bay Area next week for a series of shows, starting Wednesday with the closing concert of this season's Jazz on the Plazz series in Los Gatos, where she performs with the 18-piece Full Spectrum Jazz Big Band. She won't

be dividing her attention between a microphone and a paintbrush on the Town Plaza, but her other gigs are designed to showcase her gift for creating vivid imagery with lyrics and oil paint.

Performing in intimate duo settings with ace piano accompanist Adam Shulman, she's at the Red Poppy Art House in San Francisco on Aug. 28 and at the Sound Room in Oakland Aug. 30.

"The music inspires the heck out of me, and I apply that to my canvas," Kosins says. "It's indescribable. I'm listening to what the guy is playing, and I'm so tuned in."

On Friday, Aug. 29,

Kosins and Shulman also join forces for a concert at an Eichler home in Castro Valley, which came about when the editor of CA-Modern Magazine caught her show last year at a Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society event celebrating the release of her album "To the Ladies of Cool" (Resonance), a highly personal toast to the women who defined the mid-century West Coast cool sound: Anita O'Day, June Christy, Julie London and Chris Connor. She'll be drawing on that project and her latest album — 2013's "The Space Between" (Mahogany Jazz) — for the performances with Shulman, as well as her original songs.



ZIGGY SPITZ

Detroit-based vocalist Kathy Kosins fell into her career as a jazz singer and decided to stick with it.

With no formal training in the visual arts, Kosins started creating abstract canvases more than two decades ago and quickly found "it was almost like an out-of-body experience" painting and listening to classic recordings by the likes of Miles Davis and Rahsaan Roland Kirk, she says. Before long, Kosins noticed a "real correlation between some of my art work and art used on early Contemporary and Pacific Jazz albums," labels that often featured the work of modern artists on album covers in the 1950s.

For many years, Kosins kept her painting and her musical lives separate, but later the artistic director of a small nonprofit venue in Brownville, Nebraska, asked her if she'd consider painting on stage during a gig with pianist Joe Cartwright. Eager to act on an idea she'd been considering, she visited a local art supply store and set up her canvas on stage.

After singing a few songs, Kosins let Cartwright take over, "and he started playing a really out version of 'Rhapsody in Blue,' and a Strayhorn composition," she recalls. "I just went into another realm and ended up painting one piece each set through the three days. At the end, we sold the canvases, and I donated half the money to the venue."

Since then she's used that first event as a template, collaborating with top-shelf pianists such as Randy Porter and John di Martino, and donating half of the proceeds from the sale of her paintings to the art spaces presenting the events. She's even acquired gear for larger theaters, using a back screen projector so audiences can watch her in action.

"There's not much time, so I pick three or four colors to work with in advance," Kosins says. "I can't go too crazy. In some cases, I bring my work to sell, and I'll do an exhibition, too,

KATHY KOSINS & THE FULL SPECTRUM JAZZ BIG BAND

When: 6:30-8:30 p.m.
Wednesday

Where: Los Gatos Town Plaza, West Main Street and Santa Cruz Avenue

Admission: Free; www.jazzontheplazz.com

Also: Kathy Kosins and Adam Shulman, 7:30 p.m. Aug. 28, Red Poppy Art House, 2698 Folsom St., San Francisco; \$15-\$20; 415-826-2402, www.redpoppyarthouse.org. Also, 8 p.m. Aug. 30, Sound Room, 2147 Broadway, Oakland; \$20, \$15 advance; 510-496-4180, www.soundroom.org

with 20 or 30 canvases that will stay up for several months."

Born and raised in the Detroit area, Kosins got her start as a composer. Though always a jazz fan, she wrote songs for R&B boy bands, commercial jingles and contributed tunes to film and television productions. As a vocalist, she toured and recorded with Was (Not Was) while also singing standards in a society big band.

Her career as a jazz singer was entirely unplanned. While collaborating with songwriters April Lang and Jeff Franzel, she ended up singing the songs on a demo designed to pitch the new pieces to artists like Dianne Reeves, Lena Horne and Diana Krall. Instead, she ended up with a deal with Schoolkids Records and a critically hailed debut album, "All in a Dream's Work" (1996).

"They gave me advance money and paid me from the first record," Kosins says. "After that, I figured I'm going to stay with this jazz thing."

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