

## Flying High Big Band Canaries Who Soared



**B**ACK IN THE HEYDAY OF THE BIG BANDS, the '30s, '40s and '50s, a canary was a slang word for a female vocalist. More specifically, it was used to denote a singer who started in a small role, perhaps with a big band, who then went on to become a star in her own right. The history of jazz is filled with such women, whose origin stories began as a cog in the big band wheel, putting up with relentless gigging schedules, grinding bus tours, riding along with their predominantly male bandmates and often dealing with the sexism inherent in the times. A canary needed grit and determination to persevere. It was usually the band leaders, the Duke Ellingtons and Count Basies and perhaps a handful of the key soloists that got the recognition and served as the draw for the audience. But for the canaries, when their solo careers took off, it was the big bands that played second fiddle to them.

In this category of legendary canaries, are the icons, the great jazz singers such as Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Billie Holiday and Lena Horne, recognizable through just their mononyms. But the legends are just the tip of the iceberg. There are a host of other great singers – canaries – who in previous decades would be instantly recognizable to the fans of their day, names like Dinah Washington, Peggy Lee, Jo Stafford, Anita O'Day, Betty Carter and Shirley Horne. For many of them, their fame has faded or been obscured by the more contemporary artists and chart toppers. But the great recordings that they left us, replete with their interpretations of the classic songbook repertoire are – to use a phrase from a Nat King Cole song, unforgettable.

The concert series, *Flying High: Big Band Canaries who Soared*, celebrates the great female vocalists. Ella got her start with the Chick Webb and Benny Goodman bands, Sarah with Earl Hines and then Billy Eckstein's bands and Billie was with Count Basie, Artie Shaw and the Teddy Williams bands. Each of these superstars learned much as they cut their teeth on the bandstand. The *Flying High* series highlights not just the legends, but the vocalists who today are not as well-remembered.

The NYC leg of this series returns to Birdland for its second year this March, with a new setlist and some amazing vocalists. Conceived by

Suzanne Waldowski-Roche, who runs the non-profit, Jazz at the Ballroom – the name is a nod to Norman Granz's famous Jazz at the Philharmonic concert series. Suzanne is a devoted American Songbook aficionado. "I know the lyrics to virtually every standard in the songbook," she says. It's no coincidence that along with her partner and good friend, Champion Fulton, who is the musical director for this project, they came up with the idea of celebrating the canaries. They see it as a way of reintroducing the canaries and their music to new audiences.

Champion Fulton excels as both a piano virtuoso and an amazing vocalist, recalling artists like Nat King Cole or Louis Armstrong who were great in both arenas. She says, "I love being a vocalist and I love being a woman in jazz, but there's this idea that just being a vocalist is not enough – that you need to have an instrument. But one of the reasons that jazz became as big as it did, was because of the great female vocalists who popularized the music." Champion will be singing for parts of the sets, but also accompanying two other vocalists on piano; Ekep Nkwelle and Olivia Chindamo. Ekep's voice has been described as "intoxicating" and she is rapidly making waves in the jazz world as a rising star. Similarly, Olivia has created a buzz in the jazz world. One critic wrote that, "when she scats, it's like having another horn player in the band." Champion's trio is rounded out with bassist Neal Miner and drummer Charles Ruggiero.

"I tend to prepare for a show like this with a lot of listening," says Champion. "I like to find songs that speak to me. I want to present songs that the audience won't say 'oh, we've heard that a million times.'" In 2024, the setlist included songs from the Billie catalogue like "I Cried for You," the song "Social Call" associated with Betty Carter, and "Why don't you do Right," a song associated with Peggy Lee. This year, similarly, the setlist will mix well known standards with lesser-known ones.

The *Flying High* concert series gives the audience a way to time travel, to immerse themselves in a different era, perhaps to imagine themselves in a smoky nightclub in the '40s or '50s. And it's a way to learn a little bit more about the chanteuses who graced the bandstands, who by dint of their enormous talent and hard work, rose to the top of the charts of their day. "People don't understand how radical these women were," says Champion. "You look at the black and white photos that show these women in an old-fashioned looking dress, but these women were actually wild. Traveling around the country and singing jazz for a living ... these women were on the cutting edge!"

***Flying High: Big Band Canaries Who Soared* will be at Birdland March 6-9.**

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