

Fostina Dixon: Teachable moment by Elzy Kolb



Delaware-based saxophonist, singer and composer Fostina Dixon was on a time-out from touring and gigging for a while, spending more time in the classroom than onstage. But since her recent retirement from teaching, Fostina is back on the bandstand and eagerly hitting the road again.

Before she became an educator, she made quite a splash playing baritone, alto, soprano, flute and clarinet with everyone from Frank Foster to James Blood Ulmer. Fostina also worked with Gerald Wilson, Slide Hampton, Leslie Drayton, Charlie Persip, Abbey Lincoln and a host of others, plus fronting her own bands, Collage, and Winds of Change.

Sometimes landing a job was a breeze. Fostina recalls the night Frank Morgan invited her to jam with him at a club in California. Marvin Gaye's band director happened to be in the audience, and he liked what he heard; he asked her to audition and hired

her for what turned out to be a four-year stint with the R&B legend. "We all wish life was that easy all the time," Fostina muses.

There was at least one other time when it was. Fostina still sounds surprised at her own brashness, describing phoning David Sanborn to say she wanted to sub for him on any gigs he couldn't make. Later, she was amazed to get a call to step in with Gil Evans. "I was scared as hell," she admits. It clearly worked out—they asked her back several times during the band's long Monday night run at Sweet Basil.

But Fostina also felt the pressure of the ongoing hustle for gigs and trying to balance the artistic and business sides of earning a living in music. Abbey Lincoln encouraged the saxophonist to hang in there and trust that things would open for her, saying, "They will come to you, you have to believe that."

Trombonist, composer, arranger Melba Liston was another inspiration. Fostina felt the pull of the Big Apple while living in L.A. and earning a degree from Cal Arts. "I wanted to get into what I thought of as deeper jazz. I don't belittle the West Coast, but something led me to New York. Melba was my prompt to move to New York."

Besides playing in the Melba Liston and Company band, Fostina credits the trombonist with not only teaching her to write, but instilling in her a lifelong love for composing. “I can’t do big band charts like Melba—I didn’t get it like she got it,” the saxophonist says. “But she gave me my foundation; what I know came from her teachings. That was a wonderful experience. You had to listen to her.”

Fostina continues, “I thank God for the strong women I was around who encouraged me to be the best I could be, embrace my womanhood, not to tolerate a whole lot of stuff, and keep your dignity. I thank God for the many women and men who taught me.”

She credits saxophonists David Murray and Hamiet Bluiett with encouraging her to explore the more avant-garde aspects of jazz: “They opened my mind up.” Fostina recalls Hamiet advising her, “Treat it like fun—don’t say you’re going to practice, say you’re going to play! Play some, talk some, cry some.”

On her upcoming gig, Fostina is likely to include her arrangements of the Duke Ellington/Juan Tizol classic “Caravan,” Charles Mingus’ “Fables of Faubus,” and material she played with Abbey Lincoln, like “Story of My Father” and “The Music is the Magic.” The lineup will also include originals, such as “Prayer of Jabez,” from her recent CD, *Here We Go Again*. She penned the tune to honor Marvin Gaye; “If you hear some familiar chords in the song or a familiar feel, it was intentionally done,” she says.

Fostina also has a backlog of material she’s written over the years that has never been performed in New York. She predicts the exact set list will be a game-time decision and may include some new compositions. “Who knows, I might have another five songs done by then,” she says with a laugh.

Fostina Dixon performs at 75 Club at the Bogardus Mansion, Dec. 1-2 with Winds of Change featuring Ronnie Burrage on drums, Lonnie Plaxico on bass and Edsel Gomez on piano.

Photo Credit: Marlon S. McNeil Sr.

<http://hothousejazz.com/blog/fostina-dixon>