

PREVIEW



JEANINE
OUDERKIRK



TERESA
BROADWELL



JEANNE
O'CONNOR

Trio on the off-beat

THREE LOCAL JAZZ SINGERS GOT THAT SWING, /10

THEIR SISTERHOOD OF SWING

Women make a place for themselves singing, playing in region's jazz scene

By Amy Biancolli

Early last week, three women sat around a table in Saratoga Springs and talked about jazz. They talked about singing. They talked about their lives and careers in music, working a Capital Region jazz scene that's rich with talent. They talked about gigging at venues large and small, busy and hushed. They talked about playing to crowds who might not know the music so well.

And they talked about the influential jazz recordings of the 20th century, little masterworks of songcraft that caught their ear and continue to inspire them — standards that act like a time machine, zapping them and their audiences back to the era of smoky bars and swinging offbeats. "I open up a Real Book, and it is like furniture that was made longer ago," says singer Jeanine Ouder Kirk, referring to the thick compendium of jazz tunes. "And these songs have lasted, because their structure is just —"

She knocks on the table before her. Solid.

The table, as it happens, belongs to Jeanne O'Connor — a fellow jazz vocalist who lives in Saratoga Springs. It's a recent Tuesday morning, and the pair are relaxing in O'Connor's dining room with fellow singer Teresa Broadwell. Before them: brie. Beside them: a circa-1900 Steinway played by O'Connor's late first husband, the producer, pianist and composer Don Grolnick. Around them: warmth and laughter.

Broadwell, a jazz fiddler as well as a singer, spent 16 years as middle school orchestra director in Niskayuna. O'Connor moved up to Saratoga 15 years ago after a career in New York City and still bounces back and forth for gigs. Ouder Kirk, a Maine native who moved to Saratoga as a kid, is also a multi-instrumentalist who plays baritone sax, alto sax, bass clarinet, clarinet, flute and piano.

All of them sing — mezzo-soprano, give or take. All of them scat — that lively, flowing vocal improv that rolls out wordless syllables. All of them teach — with Ouder Kirk offering lessons on the aforementioned instruments, plus voice. All of them have recordings — whether in the works or out in the world, online or on CD. And all of them have stories to tell as three of the region's busy female vocalists.

The bedrock of their trade is the lasting sturdiness and built-in flexibility of those tunes. "You can sing the same song in about five totally different moods... These songs from the Great American Ouder Kirk says — they are kind of amazing," Ouder Kirk says. "These 32-bar songs are like these little gems — a kind of beautiful little jewel box that you can open up, and



Teresa Broadwell and her band performing at the Stockade Inn.

Amy Biancolli / Times Union

change, and expose different facets of it. And of course in terms of improvisation, there are just endless possibilities."

Choosing the right key is, well, key. "You have to pick a key where you can go high or low," Broadwell explains. "So if you're already too high, you can't improvise above that, and if you're already kinda low, you can't improvise below. You want the freedom to go in both directions." Adds O'Connor: "It's very weird, the keys — like, a song can sound really different if it's just a step away." Or even a half-step.

Rewind four days to the Friday gig at Duke's Chophouse at Rivers Casino — just off the main floor with its ping-pong hub-bub of people at tables and slot machines. Backed by pianist Tyler Giroux, she ticks through tunes like "My Favorite Things" and "Isn't This A Lovely Day."

On the old torch song "Stormy Weather," she scoops down low. On Henry Mancini's "Lujon," she oozes through lyrics made famous by Sarah Vaughan. ("His gaze swept over me now, a slow hot wind. Some days it's too warm to fight, a slow hot wind.")

On Johnny Mercer and Victor Schertzinger's "I Remember You," she scats with a saucy '40s zip.

In the middle of it, someone drops a plate near the kitchen — *crash*. Patrons glance over, then back at their food and drinks. Ouder Kirk doesn't miss a beat.

People don't always play close attention, the vocalists say. It depends on the venue and circumstances. At Caffè Lena and other



JEANNE O'CONNOR

Image from jeanneoconnor.com

venues with a musical focus: Always. In a place like Duke's, filled with people chewing and chatting: It's a little bit harder. There, as with wedding gigs, the music tends to be wallpaper. "Sometimes people are listening, sometimes they're not," Ouder Kirk says.

Part of the issue: Not everyone is conversant in jazz. And so, working their patter between songs, the singers provide a

little context and background — "Just some way to say, 'I get it, this is not the music that you grew up with, but check it out.'" Ouder Kirk says. Adds O'Connor: "Sometimes, when I'm talking on the mic, I'll just try and say: 'You know, here's a song. When you were barely a gleam in your mother's eye, this song was popular. And this was"

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the Imagine Dragons of its day." Huge laughter from around the table.

O'Connor often tosses a few jazzified pop songs into her set lists. The only problem? People have fixed ideas on how those classic tracks ought to sound. As she puts it, channeling a miffed listener: "I don't want to hear that Beatles song as a bossa nova!"

More huge laughter from around the table.

Two days after the gabfest in her dining room, O'Connor is plying her trade at Morton's Steakhouse at the Saratoga Casino Hotel. With a tight pair of instrumentalists behind her — Scott Bassinson on piano, Pete Toigo on bass — she renders tunes from Stevie Wonder, Jon Hendricks, Thelonious Monk.

"Here's one of the great songs from Rodgers and Hart — so this is my Valentine to you. 'My Funny Valentine,'" she says. A man at the bar, nursing a glass of red wine, blurts: "I love this song!"

People are chewing and chatting, but they're also listening. Though the musicians have their backs to the cavernous lobby, the sound inside is warm and clear.

O'Connor came to jazz, as so many do, via the masters of yore. "I mean, it was really from listening to records," she says, back at the clutch in her home. "And you know, I had a collision with a Sarah Vaughan record when I was, like, 20."

"Broadwell leans in. "Which one?" "That Clifford Brown. 1954?" "Oh, yeahhhhhhh," Broadwell says. "Yeah," O'Connor adds. "And I was never the same."

The three of them smile and nod. This is how it starts. This is how jazz claims new converts. In the origin story of every jazz artist are two light bulb moments; the first is a collision with the music itself. The second is the moment when swing takes hold, when it stops being an assemblage of dotted rhythms and becomes a lifelong obsession.

For Broadwell, her swing epiphany took hold as a student at SUNY Potsdam's Crane School of Music (also Ouder Kirk's alma mater), where she was studying in the music education program and fiddling in her down time with old-time Appalachian music — the swingier stuff, she said.

It was maybe the third day of percussion class, "and the professor wrote the triplets superimposed over the quarter note." That did it. "That was when the light bulb went off. Like, to me I can go back to that moment and that day and say, 'Oh my God, that's what I'm trying to do!'"

She still is. In an email later on, she states her philosophy this way: "My goal is always to swing — and I try to seek out the



JEANINE OUDERKIRK

Image from jeanineoconnor.com

If you go

Upcoming performances by Jeanne O'Connor, Jeanine Ouder Kirk and Teresa Broadwell

Jeanne O'Connor
with **Peg Delaney, keyboard:**

- **Where:** Duke's Chophouse at Rivers Casino, 1 Rush St., Schenectady.
- **When:** 5:30-9:30 p.m. Friday, Jan. 18.
- **Info:** jeanneoconnor.com

Jeanine Ouder Kirk:

- **Where:** Hamlet & Ghost, 24 Caroline St., Saratoga Springs
- **When:** 7-10 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 23
- **Info:** jeanineoconnor.com

Teresa Broadwell Trio
with **Mike Novakowski, guitar, and Pete Toigo, bass**

- **Where:** Stockade Inn, 1 Church St., Schenectady
- **When:** 7 p.m. Friday, Feb. 1.
- **Info:** teresabroadwell.com

swingingest music to play."

Five days after the table chat, Broadwell is swinging hard at the Stockade Inn in Schenectady in a show organized by the Swingtime Jazz Society. Fiddling on some tunes, singing on all of them, she performs with sizabaz: Mike Novakowski on

guitar, Leo Russo on sax, Cliff Brucker on drums, Michael Lamkin on keyboard and Toigo, once again, on bass.

The show is an album-release party for Broadwell's latest: "Just We," a collection of tunes inspired by Nat King Cole. The crowd is filled with members of the wider jazz scene, including several more from the loose sisterhood of female vocalists populating the Capital Region jazz scene: Bronte Roman, Eileen Mack and Patti Melita are all sitting or circulating, as is pianist Peggy Delaney.

O'Connor and Bassinson listen from a table in the rear as Broadwell unfurls one sly tune after another: "Just You, Just Me," "Don't Let It Go To Your Head." She plays "Skip It" by the jazz violinist Stuff Smith — one of her heroes, and the subject of her master's thesis. After that, Horace Silver's "Come On Home."

She rips through it. O'Connor snaps her fingers.

Then Broadwell sings "All of Me," but not the usual way. She sings it the way Eddie Jefferson sang it, with a comical word-flurry of desperate pleas ("Don't be mean / I'll go insane / you don't want to have a crazy person on your conscience"). It's classic "vocalese," spraying rapid, rhythmic lyrics over an instrumental solo — one of Broadwell's specialties.

She rips through it. O'Connor taps her thigh.

It's the swingingest.

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