

ENTERTAINMENT

Jazz artist Deedee Bridgewater glad genre's coming back

By Ramon Savoy
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Sentinel-Voice

Savoy: How long have you been performing and singing and when did you discover you had a voice?

Bridgewater: I've been performing for 30 years. My first professional gig was in '68 when I was 18. I've always been able to sing, thus it was always the easy way to make some money. So college went by the wayside though I did a year before dropping out taking up professional singing offers.

Savoy: Did you start through the church?

Bridgewater: No, I was in the Catholic church, so I didn't go that route.

Savoy: Where are you from originally?

Bridgewater: I was born in Memphis, Tenn., but I left when I was not quite 3, and I grew up in the very famous Flint, Mich. My mother was born in Flint, and my father is from Kentucky.

Savoy: Were your parents involved with GM?

Bridgewater: My father taught at first, and then he worked at General Motors. My mother was a secretary with the Unemployment Office in Flint, and then she went to General Motors. Then my father went back into the school system. He's a retired high school principal and my mother is a retired junior executive with General Motors.

Savoy: Are you an only child?

Bridgewater: I have one sister who's two years younger; she lives in Buffalo, N.Y. and her name is Rhonda.

Savoy: Did you ever do a duet?

Bridgewater: No, she never sang. She was a dancer when she was in high school, and she was a very good dancer, but she wanted to do other things.

Savoy: Are you still a U.S. resident and you reside overseas?

Bridgewater: Exactly.

Savoy: You spend the majority of your time in France?

Bridgewater: No. The majority of my time I spend on the road, all over the world.

I'm spending more and more time in the States, and less time in Europe.

Savoy: Do you feel that you're finally being appreciated and recognized here in the States?

Bridgewater: I can't say 'finally'; I was very much appreciated when I was in the States. I had stopped doing jazz and was doing pop music and acting. Reconnecting with people is basically what I'm doing, because I've been living in France now for 13 years and it's been just 3 years since I've been back in the States, so there was a big ten-year period when people just didn't hear from me at all in the States.

Savoy: How long have you been doing jazz?

Bridgewater: I started out as a jazz singer, I am a jazz singer. My nature, my roots are in jazz, but I'm also able to do other musical styles.

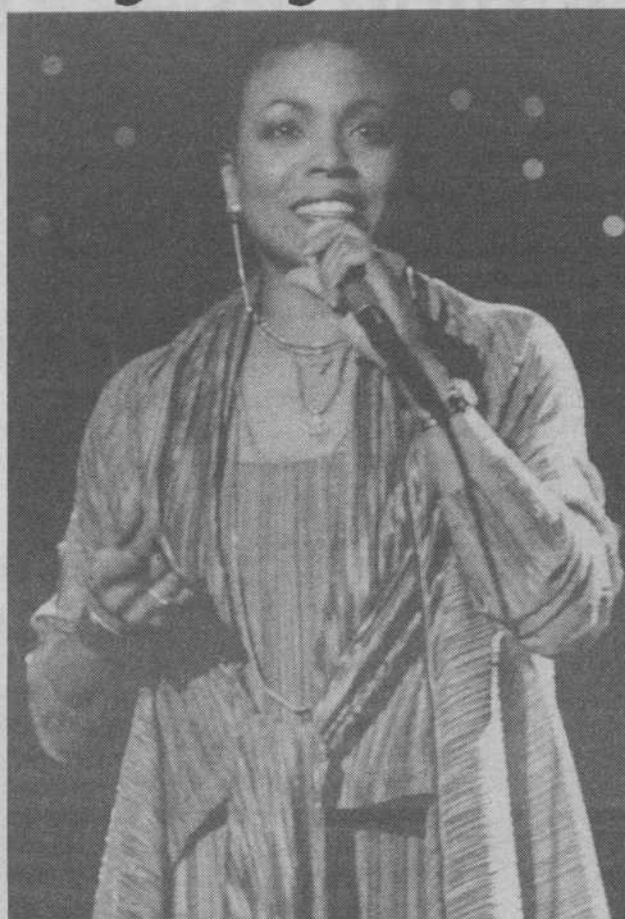
Savoy: Maybe there's a renewed interest in jazz.

Bridgewater: I hope so.

it different now that you've won these distinguished awards?

Bridgewater: It's not any different. I try to treat every concert like it's the most important concert I'm doing. What has changed is the public's perception of me. It's like I've been given a stamp of approval, so it's okay for them to like me. Our country, the United States, is a country that's built on marketing and gimmicks, so if you've got something that makes you stick out, then people sit up and take notice.

For a lot of people, winning a grammy isn't a blessing, it's more like a curse. My next album is going to be really looked at now. If I wanted to, I could get caught in the trap of making sure I do something spectacular because I think that's what the public is expecting of me, but my choice is to remain true to the music and to doing things that are challenging for me and that help me to evolve as an artist.



You know, we've lost a lot of our great legends, and jazz is the original American music form. If this music dies, then there is nothing that we can really call American music, that originated here. And I think it's very important for African-American people to rediscover this music and to have some pride in it. I don't know why jazz, like the blues, has negative connotations for African-Americans. It's a music that's largely supported by the white community.

Savoy: This has been a fantastic year for you. How is

Savoy: How challenging was it for you to put together this tribute to Ella (Fitzgerald), and how long did you work on it?

Bridgewater: First of all, I think because of this tribute and the album that I did of Horace Silver music and then the project I was involved in with Duke Ellington's music - people think I'm into doing tribute albums, but that's really not it at all. It's just coincidental that these projects fell one right after the other.

I decided to do the tribute about five months after Ella

died because no one had done a project honoring her music and her career. I thought that was just terrible. This seems to be the year, not last year, of people wanting to do big tributes to Ella Fitzgerald, so now all of a sudden there are 3 or 4 musical groups that have put together packages, which is fine.

Anyway, it took me ten months to put it together, to hire the arrangers, pick the studios and engineers, take care of the logistics for all of the guest players that I wanted, hire the contractors and oversee

who was going to be playing with me.

Then there was the mixing and the mastering and the graphic work for the cover - the whole packaging. Since I produce my own albums, I'm the one who decides everything, so the way that it's presented and the booklet and all, that is me - that's my idea, my doing, it's not the record company's. I give them a product, finished. All they have to do is mass produce it.

Savoy: Ella had such a repertoire. How did you come up with the selections?

Bridgewater: There are some songs that you have to do if you do a tribute to Ella. One is "A Tisket, a Tasket," one is "Mac the Knife," one is "Mr. Paganini." These are signature pieces. "Lady Be Good," "How High the Moon" and "Cherokee" are signature pieces.

Some tunes I had already done on other albums, but in the case of "How High the Moon," I was looking for a number in which I could feature Milt Jackson. I just love him, and he had played on the "Midnight Sun" arrangement of Ella's.

Most of the tunes I picked

because they meant something to me. When I was doing research for a tour with Jackie Terrasan and his trio in October of '96, I was listening to her early recordings because that's what I was least familiar with. That's how I ended up doing songs like "Stairway to the Stars," "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," and "Undecided," which are lesser known numbers. I had done "Let's Do It" with Jackie on the tour and the response had been really great, so I thought, 'Okay, let's do an orchestral arrangement on that,' and then the lyrics are just so much fun.

Kenny Burrell wrote the title song and sent it to me. I listened to it for a few days and I finally thought, 'This is really pretty, and it summarizes what I'm trying to say and what I think many of her fans feel.' That's how "Dear Ella" came to be and I tricked Kenny into doing it just in duo.

He didn't feel it would work just as a duo with guitar and voice, so I told him, "It's okay, Ray Brown and Andre Chekarelli, my drummer of twelve years, they'll be at the studio while we're recording," and I just booked him to record two hours before I had everybody else coming in. We did three takes, and we listened to each take and I said, "Okay, thanks, Kenny, that's cool." He didn't even know we were recording.

Savoy: There aren't many female jazz vocalists who get the recognition they deserve for their talent. How does one try to keep the heritage of the music? What can help interest the next generation of jazz female vocalists?

Bridgewater: That's really up to the individual. What I try to do in my performances, because I do get quite a few young people that come to hear me, is to show that it is not a suffering music, it's not a music that is born out of drugs and alcoholism and all the negative connotations that have been tied to jazz, and that one can have fun and it's actually very stimulating.

After having done pop and rock and all kinds of musical styles, I have to come back to (See Bridgewater, Page 11)

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