

November 23, 2007

MUSIC REVIEW | REBECCA PARRIS

A Gutbucket Full of Loss and Torchy Dreams

By [STEPHEN HOLDEN](#)

If Rebecca Parris, the Boston jazz singer who is playing a rare New York engagement at Birdland, were a blues-rock artist, she would belong to the school of gutbucket mamas whose delivery is the vocal equivalent of wielding an ax. Her voice, a rich contralto with a baritone resonance, is so commanding that when a song's attitude is combative, she can scare you. But when the mood is playful, she can also enfold you in a musical bear hug.

That rawness, combined with sophisticated jazz technique that embraces some rough scat improvisation, and the support of an excellent pianist (Brad Hatfield), makes for a style that lends much of what she sings a cosmic dimension.

In the first of her two sets on Wednesday evening sadness outweighed joy, as Ms. Parris and her trio (Dean Johnson on bass and Matt Gordy on drums, in addition with to Mr. Hatfield) eviscerated three classic torch songs. Prefaced with Ms. Parris's dedication, "For you, daddy," Rodgers and Hart's lovelorn lament "He Was Too Good to Me" was offered in memory of her father. The slowest version I've ever heard, it became a moving jazz dirge that turned on the phrase, "He'd never say go away now." The devotion of a loving parent, she implied, is the only true love you can count on.

Introducing "You Don't Know What Love Is," Ms. Parris warned that it was angry and bitter and made good on those words. If her anger wasn't explosive and her bitterness not corrosive, she found even more shades of emotion in the song than Billie Holiday did in her classic rendition on the "Lady in Satin" album.

"Lush Life," the third torch classic, was also taken to the limit in an interpretation that emphasized the despairing self-recognition at the song's end. In her version the narrator makes a conscious decision to self-destruct and "rot with the rest of those whose lives are lonely too."

Disappointment and loss were not the only dishes on the menu. There was a joyful "Street of Dreams," and a witty "Darn That Dream." Most revealing was a rendition of the old [Doris Day](#) hit "It's Magic," in which Ms. Parris's stressing of the words "the magic is my love for you" transformed a girlish swoon of enchantment into the narrator's grown-up awareness that she is creating her own happiness.

Rebecca Parris is at Birdland, 315 West 44th Street, Clinton, through tomorrow; (212) 581-3080, birdlandjazz.com.