

CREATE

Jazz vocalist Synia Carroll is all about making connections



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By Bill DeYoung



As a former schoolteacher, Synia Carroll strongly believes music, as a form of communication, can impart valuable lessons. "They haven't learned it so they don't appreciate it," she says. "Cause nobody's teaching it to them. But if you went in there and you worked with them, and you connected with them, they would want to learn. Because I tried it, and I found out oh no, they want to learn. They want to know. It's our history. It's their history." Photo: Jayne Drooger.

Up in Philadelphia, her hometown, Synia Carroll grew up virtually jazz-free. Sure, her parents had a couple of Dinah Washington albums, but Dad actually preferred the blandness of *101 Strings* and similar musical wallpaper.

Synia's own tastes ran more to Stevie Nicks than Sarah Vaughan; she could strum her acoustic guitar and croon "Fire and Rain" just like a female James Taylor. But the soulful, syncopated versatility of Ella or Billie? Not in the Carroll house.

Time, of course, changes everything, and today Synia Carroll is a leading light on the bay area jazz scene. Although she's based in Sarasota, and sings there with clockwork regularity, she has a large and dedicated St. Petersburg following.

She'll be at the Palladium Theater Tuesday evening, out in front of the Helios Jazz Orchestra for a program of Big Band tunes.

"Synia checks all of the boxes in what we need for a guest singer with Helios Jazz Orchestra," offers bandleader David Manson, whose nonprofit EMIT is producing the concert. "She projects and enunciates with a natural voice and has a deep understanding of jazz styles that is evident in her song interpretations."

Carroll's circuitous journey from folkie to schoolteacher to jazz chanteuse began, as most journeys do, long ago and far away.

"My mom always told us stories before bed," she recalls. "She did a little routine almost every night. And when I first tried to tell stories to little preschoolers, I was terrified, but I went back to what my mom used to do with us, and they loved it.

"Then I started learning African and other folk tales. And then when I found that it wasn't all about me, these characters took on their own life. And things would happen that I never planned on happening – what I would do with my body, or my voice, or how I would communicate. A whole other dimension came in there that I didn't even know existed.

"At some point, when I started singing jazz, I understood what it was to tell a story with a song."

She was, in fact, a professional storyteller, and played in bands (including a decade in the ranks in Mikata, an all-original worldbeat group). At Wesleyan University, she studied musical theater.

"I lived a life so that I could bring this life to jazz, that's what it feels like," Carroll says. "I did everything but this, and now I bring all of that to this."

It was in 2014, not long after she'd left New Haven, Connecticut for Sarasota, that she strolled into a local jazz jam. Summing up every ounce of courage she could, she went onstage, with musicians she'd never met, and sang "Round Midnight." It was one of just three jazz tunes she knew at the time.

She returned every week, each time with a new song, building up her confidence ... and ability. "My voice just started to emerge," she says, "in ways I never really knew were there."

In time Carroll started getting regular restaurant gigs, discovering that as she grew, and adapted, more musicians were willing, and eager, to play with her.

Every time, every tune, she feels like she's taking the audience on a unique journey.

“The music has communication between you and the players – that's really important – as well as you and the audience. And there's a story behind every song; you want to tell the story.

“And it has this freedom. Like, you don't have to sound pretty all the time. You just have to be real. You have to be authentic. Sometimes that means sounding pretty, and sometimes that means sounding whatever. It may not even be a sound. And all the notes that are silent! In other words, the space between the notes counts. It all counts.”

She says this process can be seen as an analogy about life. “When somebody plays something and it moves you, it touches you, you can respond to it vocally. Just like the instruments do. It's like there's a conversation between the musicians.”

Carroll's husband, Ed Linehan, is president of the Jazz Club of Sarasota. She has performed at the Sarasota Jazz Festival, the Suncoast Jazz Festival and the St. Petersburg Jazz Festival, and is a frequent guest of the Al Downing Tampa Bay Jazz Association. She received the “Maestro” award for her autobiographical show *Finding Sassy* at the 2019 Sarasolo Festival. This summer, she and a quartet channeled the music of Nina Simone at a sold-out Palladium tribute concert. Although Tuesday's show features Carroll as the featured singer in front of 18 or more musicians – “It's a challenge, but I love a challenge and I love music,” she enthuses – she normally does her “storytelling” show with a small combo of young, eager bay area players.

She says she's enjoyed watching them grow over the years. “I hear all of them reaching. And it's really cool, because I'm reaching too.

“People will say ‘Oh, you've gotten so much better.’ I'll say well, give me a couple more years. I'm not done. This is just the beginning. I'm going to be reaching until I'm reaching for the next life.”

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