

Wilson Reprises *Blue Light* in New York City

Twenty years ago, the paradigm of a jazz vocal album was a singer, a set from the Great American Songbook and a piano trio. Maybe there was a guitarist, a horn soloist or the occasional string arrangement. Then came Cassandra Wilson's 1993 game-changing album, *Blue Light 'Til Dawn*, her first on Blue Note.

Wilson revisited the album on its 20th anniversary before a packed house at New York's Highline Ballroom on Jan. 13. She was backed by an expanded eight-piece orchestra including members of the original band (guitarist Brandon Ross, string-player Charlie Burnham and bassist Lonnie Plaxico). The concert marked the begin-

ning of a busy year for the jazz diva that will include the release of an expanded edition of *Blue Light*, a U.S. and European tour in the spring and the recording of a Billie Holiday tribute album.

As on the record, she evoked a sensual, all-night vigil in which the listener has the sensation of eavesdropping on a heartbroken soliloquy. "You Don't Know What Love Is," one of the most rueful and bluesy ballads ever written, was the perfect opener. After a rubato intro, the band adopted an undulating 6/8 meter that became the backdrop for a violin solo by Burnham. "Come On In My Kitchen" included a variety of picked and strummed instruments, including Kevin Breit's electric mandolin, and eloquent harmonica commentary by Gregoire Maret.

One of the few songs whose live presentation



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On *Blue Light*, Wilson—with help from first-time producer Craig Street and guitarist-arranger Ross—realized an original vision of what a jazz vocal album could be. The eclectic album included her interpretations of Robert Johnson's Delta blues ("Come On In My Kitchen," "Hellhound On My Trail"), Van Morrison and Joni Mitchell's jazzy folk-rock ("Tupelo Honey," "Black Crow"), r&b, world music-flavored originals and a lone standard: "You Don't Know What Love Is." The songs were presented in a funky, string-based acoustic blues style with nary a piano in sight. The record was hugely influential, paving the way for artists like Norah Jones and a profusion of roots music now under the umbrella of Americana.

At the Highline show, Wilson's stage presence and ability to tap into deep emotion made her appearance as much a theatrical event as a musical one. Draped for the occasion in a simple blue dress—her braids swaying with the languorous

arguably surpassed the album's original arrangement was "Tell Me You'll Wait For Me," written by Charles Brown and Oscar Moore and made famous by Ray Charles. On the album version, Wilson's smoky voice is accompanied only by bass and drums. At the Highline, the accompaniment was expanded to include lyrical pianism by Jon Cowherd and a haunting chromatic harmonica solo by Maret. Throughout the show, Wilson explored the emotional possibilities of the slow tempos, which served as an expansive landscape for her expert manipulation of time.

After completing the song cycle, Wilson followed up with her rhythmic explorations of *Bitches Brew*'s "Miles Runs The Voodoo Down," her unique version of The Monkees' "Last Train To Clarksville" and her devastating take on Holiday's "Strange Fruit."

Is Cassandra Wilson, as Time magazine famously called her in 2001, "America's Best Singer"? Hard to say. Certainly in this show she demonstrated that she is in full control of one of the most flexible and dramatically expressive voices in jazz.

—Allen Morrison

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