

## Eliane Elias Seduces at Toronto Jazz Festival

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A modest Chet Baker revival seems to be under way, judging by the recent release of several albums summoning the spirit of the ultra-low-key trumpeter-singer and the romantic, melodic songs he favored.

In one of the highlights of this year's Toronto Jazz Festival (June 20–29), pianist-singer Eliane Elias and her trio showcased her own recently issued Baker set, *I Thought About You: A Tribute To Chet Baker* (Concord Jazz). Unlike last year's hypnotic, Grammy-nominated *The Book Of Chet* (Sunnyside) by Luciana Souza, which focused on Baker's mournful ballads, the Elias album features more mid-tempo and uptempo songs; indeed, Baker's output over his long career included many such tunes.

It's no coincidence that both albums are from outstanding Brazilian musician/singers. Baker profoundly changed the trajectory of Brazilian jazz—the tradition in which both Elias and Souza are steeped.

"Chet Baker and the cool jazz movement had an enormous influence on the originators of bossa nova, like João Gilberto and Antônio Carlos Jobim," Elias said between songs during her sold-out show at the Old Mill, an enormous Swiss chalet of a country inn not far from downtown Toronto. "In fact, Jobim used to tell me how much Chet had influenced him." She cited Baker's unaffected singing and his tendency to phrase over the bar line, both hallmarks of bossa nova.

There's an important similarity between Baker and Elias: He was decidedly a trumpeter who sang, not a singer who played trumpet; Elias is, first and foremost, a classically trained pianist and a composer, who also happens to sing.

At the age of 22, after only one year in New York, her astounding piano chops got her a seat in the fusion supergroup Steps Ahead. More recently, she has harnessed her formidable technique in a re-

embrace of her Brazilian heritage. On her new album, Elias explores the Baker catalog with an impeccable mainstream swing that sometimes recalls Oscar Peterson.

As a singer and self-professed romantic, she uses her sultry and vibrato-free alto to seduce the listener into each tune.

At the Old Mill she led the most polished of trios with the versatile Steve Cardenas on guitar and her husband, Marc Johnson, on bass. Noting the lack of a drummer, she quoted Baker's wonderful line, "It takes a great drummer to be better than no drums at all." Half of the songs on the new album are drummer-less.

Elias opened the 90-minute set with a stunning arrangement of "You And The Night And The Music," which she recorded for the 2008 album *Something For You: Eliane Elias Sings & Plays Bill Evans* (Blue Note). Johnson, who played in Evans' final trio, is the most melodic of bass soloists and a deft accompanist. Cardenas soloed with lyricism, definition and restraint, never overshadowing the boss.

In a series of songs by Baker, Elias displayed her special combination of cool singing and fiery, piano swing. The instrumental interplay of "This Can't Be Love" was, she said, inspired by pianist Red Garland and bassist Paul Chambers. Other standards associated with Baker followed, including "I Thought About You," "There Will Never Be Another You" and "I've Never Been In Love Before." For Rodgers & Hart's "Blue Room," Elias came out from behind the piano to sing and sway to the guitar-bass duo, giving Johnson and Cardenas an opportunity to prove that two is all the orchestra you need when you know what you're doing.

On "Everything Depends On You," it was Johnson's turn to drop out, and Elias and Cardenas played as a guitar-piano duo. Just as on Baker's recording of the tune, Cardenas comped slow and steady while Elias crooned the melody and, sparingly, commented on the lyrics with graceful piano accents and feathery runs. Here, as elsewhere, there was a sense of drama in her playing that came from silence—knowing when to lay out—and from keeping each thought rhythmically pure and distinct.

Some of the show's finer moments, however, had nothing to do with Baker: a solo piano exploration of "Liza" that morphed into Jobim's "So Danco Samba," and three of her own compositions. One of them, "Stairway To The 9th Dimension," required audience participation. Mostly a swing tune, it periodically paused for a strange interlude in which Johnson bowed the double bass and Elias played shimmering "Twilight Zone"-ish trebly chords. Elias prompted the audience to clap, whistle or stamp their feet to help "bring the band back from the ninth dimension." When the audience complied, she broke into a demonic grin, as she led the trio back into the groove. Elias finished the set with "Bowing To Bud," her homage to Bud Powell.

Elias saved her most ambitious tune for the encore, her showpiece "The Time Is Now." It was as if she had prepared the audience for this all along, gently seducing them first with familiar standards and bossas, then, *wham!*—dazzling them with a high-energy, multi-part Latin jazz rhapsody that left the crowd cheering.

—Allen Morrison