

## Rumbling Force: Pamela Reese Smith, “Live at the Redstone Room”

Written by Stephanie Yang  
Wednesday, 10 August 2011 10:33

---



As “This Masquerade” begins on her recently released live CD recorded at Davenport’s Redstone Room, Pamela Reese Smith’s voice emerges from the piano prelude of Manny Lopez III as a husky, tuneful whisper, growing louder and more intense from phrase to phrase. As she builds, she blends breathiness and fullness to create a wistful and passionate melody. Her use of a light, breathy tone establishes the mournful mood of the song, especially when singing the word “lost,” imparting confusion and hopelessness.

Her voice continues to soften and grow with the lyrics. When singing the phrase “this masquerade,” she starts quietly and then allows her voice to expand as she holds out the line –communicating strength, despair, and other feelings.

Throughout the album, Smith employs this effectively expressive technique, and her big voice creates a deep, encompassing sound. But at times she misses the pitch a little, and the heavy richness of her voice becomes a disadvantage.

The CD was recorded last year and released by Polyrythms, and it includes jazz standards such as “Summertime” and “Misty.” Smith – who hails from New York – also performs some lesser-known songs and a medley of two songs, “Please Send Me Someone to Love” and “Steal Away.”

The backing quintet led by Lopez sets a suitably upbeat mood for the main event with a grooving drumbeat and catchy melody. Smith’s clear diction conveys confidence and conviction, and both go a long way toward covering up any mistakes. She has a warm but gravelly voice that rolls along her lower register with ease, as on “Grandma’s Hands.” She consistently brings out the central image of this song with a rumbling force that shows off her deep tone.

However, Smith’s high notes lack the precision of her lower ones. In “Broadway,” Smith takes her voice higher and loses that smooth quality; she sounds harsher and slightly strained,

## Rumbling Force: Pamela Reese Smith, “Live at the Redstone Room”

Written by Stephanie Yang

Wednesday, 10 August 2011 10:33

---

interrupting the playful tone of the song. The problem also shows up in “Misty” and “Summertime.”

And while her voice has a lot of weight and fills the room, it occasionally sounds too heavy on some tracks. That vocal richness is ideal for slower songs, but on upbeat tracks such as “Broadway” and “Summertime,” her style seems to slow them down.

That suggests a limited range, and it causes other problems on the live disc. Although the choice of songs includes a variety of styles and themes – from the carefree fun of “Broadway” to the slow, lovesick tune of “Misty” – there’s not enough variation in the presentation. “This Masquerade” and “Girl from Ipanema” start off similarly and have the same pacing, and the same can be said of “Moody’s Mood of Love” and “Your Love Is King.”

Some lighter, quicker vocalizations would help. “Never Too Much” is the most upbeat song on the CD, and Smith and the instrumentalists perform with lots of energy. However, she cuts off her notes abruptly, and while her approach works, nimbler vocals would have made the song smoother.

And I wish Smith had taken the opportunity to really show off that voice – with some complicated runs or long, sustained notes.

Still, there’s no denying that Smith seemed to have a great time performing, and her passion and personal connection to each song are evident, especially during her frisky rendition of “Fine Brown Frame.” Throughout the song, her voice lilts around phrases, and she uses consonants to emphasize certain words; she sings it with enthusiasm to spare.

Pamela Reese Smith: *Live at the Redstone Room* is available at *Mojo’s, Co-op, Jazmine Galleries, 572 Supper Club, Ms. Brimani’s, and Greatest Grains.*