

EDMONTON JAZZ SOCIETY

THE EJS NEWSLETTER VOLUME 8 NUMBER 6 SEPTEMBER 1981

The Palms Café and Edmonton Jazz Society present

Sheila Jordan



with

Bob Moses, drums. Harvie Swartz, bass.

Steve Kuhn, piano.

Wednesday

thru

September

16

thru

20

\$ 5.⁰⁰ EJS members

\$ 7.⁰⁰ non-members

Sunday

memberships at the door

Sheila Jordan: the music stays pure

By Robert Palmer

It seems incongruous to encounter one of the most gifted jazz singers in the spiffy offices of a top New York City advertising agency. But Sheila Jordan has worked there for fifteen years, and despite her snowballing reputation from recent recordings for ECM (distributed by Warner Bros.) and other labels, she will probably continue to work there. "I don't mind the job," she says in an accent that betrays her origins in a Pennsylvania coal-mining town. "This way, the music is pure. If I get hired to sing, it's because it's my music. It's much easier for me to do an office job than work the Playboy Club, where I know I'm gonna get fired. I've been to the Playboy Club, and I've gotten fired. I've been fired from a lot of so-called jazz-oriented rooms. They only want you to sing a certain way."

Sheila Jordan has been singing her own way since she was a teenager sitting in with Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and other jazz masters who visited Detroit. She has been a legend among musicians for a long time. In the early Fifties, her Manhattan loft was a haven for players as diverse as Parker, Sonny Rollins and various disciples of the iconoclastic pianist Lennie Tristano, as well as her former husband, pianist Duke Jordan.

In the early Sixties, she recorded a performance with composer George Russell and his band on Riverside—a haunting remake of "You Are My Sunshine" that Russell had dreamed up after accompanying Jordan to her hometown and witnessing the poverty and hopelessness of life in the mines. She also recorded an album, *Portrait of Sheila*, for Blue Note. But Riverside folded, the Blue Note album went out of print in the U.S.,

and except for an occasional club engagement or guest spots on various albums, Jordan wasn't heard from—outside the advertising agency—until the late Seventies, when she made an album for the Danish Steeple Chase label (*Sheila*) and joined a quartet led by pianist Steve Kuhn (who also records for ECM).



Kuhn's band is a freewheeling unit, with the irrepressible Bob Moses on drums and Harvie Swartz on bass. *Playground*, the group's first ECM album, is lyrical and restrained, with Kuhn's odd, often enigmatic compositions serving as provocative vehicles for Jordan's sensitively phrased vocals. On a recent night at New York's Fat Tuesday's (where the group's forthcoming ECM album was recorded live), the quartet gave a mesmerizing performance. All the musicians are veterans—Kuhn was John Coltrane's pianist before McCoy Tyner joined the band, Moses was with Gary Burton and Rahsaan Roland Kirk—but Jordan effortlessly, and perhaps reluctantly, dominates the ensemble.

Above all, she sings directly from an inner reserve of deep hurt (her face is etched with disappointment: her short-lived marriage to Duke Jordan, the problems raising a daughter as a single working mother in New York City, her musical frustrations) and unconquerable resilience. And she is exquisitely musical; her timing, intona-

tion and sense of color and line would make her a great singer in any idiom. The emotion that comes through is breathtaking, whether in a Kuhn standard like "On Green Dolphin Street" or a wailing wordless improvisation that recalls a deep blues singer like Muddy Waters or the timeless immediacy of Hank Williams. "If I hadn't started singing jazz," she says, "I'd probably have been a country singer."

Fortunately, Jordan's early winters in the bleak mining country were offset by occasional summer visits to Detroit, where her mother lived and hung out with a hip young crowd that liked jazz. Sheila finished high school in Detroit, where she sang with such local legends as pianists Barry Harris and Tommy Flanagan before moving to New York in 1950. In New York, she studied with Lennie Tristano ("He gave me a lot of confidence") and worked at Page Three and other Greenwich Village coffeehouses before making her first recording. During the rest of the Sixties and most of the Seventies, she raised her daughter by Duke Jordan, conquered a drinking problem and refined her art.

Jordan's favorite singer is still Billie Holiday. "But I listen to other singers as a listener," she says, "never as somebody to study. The one thing I never want to do is imitate anyone. I had it really hard growing up, and I feel I have enough from my own life to draw on. Besides, if I sang something that belonged to somebody else, I would feel like a thief. I have to sing my way, and I have to sing."

As a longtime employee of the ad agency, Jordan gets a month's vacation each year, which she uses to tour Europe and America with the Kuhn band. As the demand for the group grows, pressures on Sheila mount. "People tell me I should quit my job," she says, "that it's a crime I'm still working days. But I left home at seventeen and I've been working day jobs ever since. I've accepted the fact that my fate is to work a job and sing jazz when I can. And it's not a crime. A lot of people don't have a job, so I think I'm very lucky." □

STEVE KUHN/SHEILA JORDAN BAND

at

The Palms
10010·102 St.

Tickets at the door