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Debbie Harry Swaps Punk for Upscale Swank at New York's Cafe Carlyle: Concert Review



Michael Wilhoite for Café Carlyle

The Bottom Line

Performing mostly material from her unfairly neglected solo career, the Blondie frontwoman proves she doesn't need to perform her classic hits to be compelling.

Venue

*Cafe Carlyle
New York City
(Tuesday, March 24)*

"Why am I doing this?" Debbie Harry rhetorically asked shortly into the opening night of her debut engagement at the Cafe Carlyle. It was a good question, as the swanky, upscale nightspot is not a place you'd imagine the co-founder of the seminal new wave band Blondie to be performing. But, as reflected by the venue's recent booking of Buster Poindexter (aka David Johansen) recently proved, their current clientele is increasingly comprised of the same people who were hanging out in East Village clubs a few decades ago.

The 69-year-old singer, whose continuing rock 'n' roll-style coolness was signified by the black leather jacket and sunglasses she wore during the first few numbers, went on to answer her own question.

"The whole point of this was the ego boost of doing material I never got to do with Blondie," she explained.

And she lived up to her word, with not a single hit from her hugely successful band in the program. Rather, it consisted mostly of material from her unfairly neglected solo career, as well as several songs she recorded with the avant-garde jazz ensemble The Jazz Messengers, with whom she toured on and off for several years in the '90s.

Instead of the usual trios and quartets usually crowded on the tiny stage, her sole accompanist was Matt Katz-Bohen, providing atmospherically diverse musical textures on guitar, synthesizer and piano.

Harry was clearly nervous at first, relievedly exclaiming "That's one down!" after finishing her first number, the lovely ballad "Strike Me Pink." At one point, after a lengthy introduction to one of her songs, she asked, "Am I talking too much?"

Her still sweet, ethereal voice showing little signs of wear despite her admission at one point that "I'm a little rough around the edges," she was clearly relishing the opportunity to perform the low-key material in such an intimate setting. It perfectly suited jazzy ballads like "Imitation of a Kiss" and "Wednesday Afternoon," as well as the dreamy pop

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song "French Kissin' " from her 1986 album *Rockbird*. The latter, for you trivia buffs, was written by Chuck Lorre, who went on to a rather more successful career creating such television sitcoms as *Two and a Half Men*.

Although inevitably hampered by the small space, Harry still managed to display rock star insouciance at times, loudly crashing cymbals at the beginning of the Chris Stein-penned "Lovelight" and frequently engaging in sinuous hand and arm movements.

Her intense commitment to the material was palpable in her powerfully emotive delivery of songs like "Lucky Jim" and "Love Doesn't Frighten Me At All," the latter written by her accompanist Katz-Bohen. But the undeniable highlight was her passionate rendition of "I Cover the Waterfront" (originally performed by Billie Holiday) that gracefully segued into the Moby song "New York New York."

It was hard not to wish that the singer would at least have thrown a bone to her fans by performing a Blondie hit or two in stripped-down arrangements. And there were times when the almost uniformly understated material proved a bit monotonous. But the show reached a charming conclusion with a number that probably no one could have predicted. It was "The Rainbow Connection," which she said she had once sung with Kermit the Frog on *The Muppet Show*. Delivered with an air of tender wistfulness, it was like she was saying goodnight to the audience with a lullaby.

Set List

Strike Me Pink

French Kissin'

Imitation of a Kiss

Lovelight

Love with a Vengeance

Lucky Jim

I Cover the Waterfront/New York New York

Love Doesn't Frighten Me at All

Wednesday Afternoon/End of the Run

Kiss and Don't Tell

In Love With Love

The Rainbow Connection