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Elling To Salute Sinatra in NYC

Throughout this year of Frank Sinatra's centennial, singer Kurt Elling has been on a mission: re-interpreting some of the patriarch of pop's best-known songs for a new generation of listeners.



Kurt Elling (Photo: Anna Webber)

Backed by a sextet of Clark Sommers on bass, John McLean on guitar, Jared Schonig on drums, Wayne Tucker on trumpet, Troy Roberts on tenor sax and Gary Versace on piano, Elling will make his debut at New York's Cafe Carlyle on Oct. 13, kicking off a five-night residency of his Sinatra tribute show, *Elling Swings Sinatra*.

Elling is an intriguing fit for Sinatra's canon. An edgy, bold performer, Elling is a pure jazzman whose repertoire includes original compositions and poetry. Sinatra, the product of an age of dance music, is the unrivaled storyteller, blessed with the power to marshal all at once a batch of skills that includes timing, phrasing, pronunciation and acting ability to make the listener feel myriad emotions, particularly on ballads.

Notwithstanding their differing styles, the two artists do have something in common: a love for singing that is unsparingly revealing and provocative.

DownBeat chatted with Elling about his upcoming gig at the Carlyle, and about Sinatra's impact on his work.

DownBeat: Why are you paying tribute to Sinatra with this particular show?

Kurt Elling: I had never really considered even doing a [Sinatra] show before the anniversary came up. Sinatra's got the ultimate staying power. He's really defined so much of what a swinging male singer can do and should do. And even though I tend not to spend that much time in the Sinatra genre, or category, he's certainly a larger-than-life figure. He's certainly got a great story to tell. He doesn't need my help, by any stretch, but it's a thrilling and fun area in which to investigate things.

Are you doing your own thing or are you actually using some Sinatra charts?



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There are a couple of things I've thrown in—reductions of Nelson Riddle things. I'll give them a little of what they came for, and then of what they didn't know they came for. We'll do "In The Still Of The Night," and I think I have a chart on "Around The World" that [alto saxophonist] Jeff Clayton wrote for me. Several other things that I either developed with [pianist] Laurence Hobgood or that he developed on our behalf.

And then we've got a couple of new arrangements my friend John McLean has been writing. He's got a beautiful, beautiful arrangement of "I Have Dreamed" from *The King And I*. I'm very excited about presenting that arrangement. We'll have a new version of "I'm A Fool To Want You." I really want to get into the deepest darkest depths of the moment as much as it's a celebration of the moment.

When a lot of folks do well-known performers' songs, they want to imitate or they copy. Is there a lesson in this? You have a model, but it's also important that you develop your own sound, your own style. Am I right?

Yes, that's what I'm going for as a jazz musician. I just want to sound as much as myself. Now, that said, I want to be fully formed and informed by history. You can't learn a lot of the lessons in life that you need to learn to be as fluent, articulate and harmonious with the music unless you have investigated and digested the creative elements that have preceded you. And Sinatra is certainly one of those elements.

In my book, it's Jon Hendricks, it's Mark Murphy, it's Sinatra, it's Joe Williams. I've got that kind of categorization happening. And I think for big band swinging, for the swagger, Sinatra really set the standard for that. And so that's right in my wheelhouse—or least it ought to be if I'm going to call myself a jazz singer.

The core of Sinatra's art is his ability to sing ballads. What do you think about him as a ballad singer?

He sings to the end of the thought. He doesn't take a breath in any of the thoughtless places where singers usually take a breath just because they need to. He has the control and the mindfulness to sing to a complete thought, or at least to sing to a comma and to the end of a sentence. And that's one of the main things I tell my students and I actually use him as an example to point to that.

You phrase to the end of the thought. You don't take a breath in the middle of a word. You don't take a breath at an awkward place so it breaks it up. You need the audience to understand the full thought of what you're saying. That thought has to be effortlessly apprehended by the audience. Sometimes that means a little more physical work and a lot more mindfulness on the part of the singer, so that people don't even notice how well you are singing, they just hear the music.



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Sinatra's mission was to interpret lyrics. In an age when the written word has been devalued, isn't it tough for singers to appreciate lyrics like that, and get the most out of them?

And I'll give you one more. The number of instrumentalists in jazz who either have never learned to pay attention to the lyric. When a singer's singing, the best accompanists always listen to what the lyric has in mind and they respond in the solo space in a way that reflects that amplifies and helps to articulate the emotion that's happening in the lyric. And that's what the singer is supposed to be getting over. And anybody who is not ready to go down that road is missing a big, big chunk of the collaborators' art.

Lester Young and Miles Davis used to listen to Sinatra to figure out how to play a ballad.

Trane did the same thing. He was listening and trying to figure out the phrasing and breath control of what Frank Sinatra was into. The greatest of players are going to be like the greatest of singers.

By differentiating yourself you avoid inevitable and invariably tough comparisons with Sinatra. That's Kurt Elling. He's not trying to be Sinatra, so I'm not going to compare. Is that in your mind, too?

Even before I was doing this show or versions of this show, people would say, "I hear some Sinatra in you," and I would say thank you. And "I hear a little Mark Murphy in you," and I'd say, thank you. I want those sounds in there. I want to have a family resemblance. I want there to be recognizable elements of me that show that I belong to the history of the music.

It's just like someone coming up to a kid and saying, "You're just like your Uncle Joe." And guess what, that's your favorite uncle. So that's a big compliment to you. I have enough confidence in what I'm about that it's already going to sound like me, even as it sounds like the great singers who have gone before me. I'm perfectly satisfied and content with that.

Is there a song of Sinatra's that you especially like singing?

There are a lot of them. "In The Still Of The Night" is great. The swinging "I Only Have Eyes For You." I love doing "I Have Dreamed," a fantastic, beautiful composition and a great, great arrangement.

I notice you didn't mention "I've Got You Under My Skin," which a lot of people think is his greatest uptempo song.



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I hope I've got enough smarts to realize that if you don't have a big band, to really bring that level of volume and to really play that arrangement the way it's supposed to be played, go down a different road. You're not going to outdo that recording with two horns and a rhythm section, unless you're Frank. And again, I'm me, so ... discretion.

Any last things you'd like to mention about your upcoming Sinatra show? This is probably the last of the series doing exclusively Sinatra. It's nice to do it for the anniversary. I'm not here to suddenly go down that road. I've got another couple of records that are in mind, that are coming out that are going to be my signature stuff as ever. I'm excited about that. One of them is not even under my imprint as such. I'm making a record with Branford Marsalis in December. And he and I are working together on a number of tunes and with his band. That's going to be a thrill.

(Note: To read a review of a centennial tribute concert to Sinatra by his son, Frank Sinatra Jr., click [here](#). To read DownBeat's guide to the Fall/Winter festival season for 2015-'16, click [here](#).)