

The New York Times

THE Arts

February 20, 2014



MICHELLE V. AGINS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Nellie McKay, the singer and songwriter, at Café Carlyle.

Where Timelessness Meets Time Travel

With a head full of blond curls, and wearing a glittery blouse, Nellie McKay flounced into Café Carlyle on Tuesday evening, ushering a gust of downtown fresh-

STEPHEN HOLDEN

MUSIC REVIEW

ness into this elegant uptown precinct. Ms. McKay, 31, has been a presence on the cultural scene for at least a decade. But she still wears the mystique of a willful prodigy who is smarter, more talented and hipper than everyone else: a performer who answers only to herself. Gifts that others spend years refining seem to come naturally to her.

Ms. McKay has merely to sit down at the piano, open her mouth, and out comes the sweet lilting sound of a classic pop-jazz singer, a mixture of Mildred Bailey, Billie Holiday and Doris Day, paradoxically sophisticated and girlish. There is a subtle bounce in her delivery as she lingers behind a phrase just long enough to convey a steady pulse of swing.

Her new show, "Nellie With a Z" is a 50-50 mixture of standards and original material. Because of the uncanny accuracy of her ear, she can write and sing in any style, and you can't always

Nellie McKay performs through Saturday at Café Carlyle, 35 East 76th Street, Manhattan; 212-744-1600.

Piano or ukulele accompanies a voice both girlish and wise.

be certain that one of her original songs is not an obscure period piece. Her impeccable renditions of "Skylark," "Midnight Sun," "I Cover the Waterfront" and "Moon River" (in Portuguese) were dreamy and light. If you closed your eyes and listened, you were transported to the land of long ago and far away. But she also delivered an original up-to-the-minute hip-hop ditty, "Rusky Rap," timed for the Winter Olympics.

The show began with Ms. McKay accompanying herself on piano, then she shifted to the ukulele, an instrument that buoys her light voice and adds to her aura of a childlike playfulness.

Underneath it all is a serious political sensibility. Ms. McKay is a feminist, vegan and an animal-rights advocate. And her beliefs leak through her zany, stream-of-consciousness lyrics. The show ended with her best-known song, "Mother of Pearl," a caustic, funny antifeminist diatribe that she presented as a paid message from Michele Bachmann.