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THE Arts

Recapturing the Spirit of That California Sound

If you attended Rita Wilson's opening night show at the Café Carlyle on Wednesday evening and closed your eyes at certain moments you could imagine you

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MUSIC REVIEW

were cruising down a Southern California highway in the early 1970s. Sandwiched between the music of Joni Mitchell and Jackson Browne on the car radio was a promising new voice whose sound fit right in with theirs. Maybe that voice wasn't as strong or as distinctive but it embodied the "laid-back" (pardon the vintage slang) spirit of soft rock from lotus land at a moment when the California dream still beckoned like a mirage.

Back then Ms. Wilson was a little too young to join that now-legendary circle of Laurel Canyon

Through Oct. 4 at the Café Carlyle, 35 East 76th Street, Manhattan; 212-744-1600; thecarlyle.com.



MICHELLE V. AGINS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Rita Wilson, performing mostly original songs with a forthright voice, is at the Café Carlyle.

troubadours, but as the saying goes, "It's never too late to be what you might have been." So here she is at Café Carlyle singing sturdy, mostly original songs, written with a variety of collaborators, that evoke the musical

spirit of those days. One song, "Joni," is a tribute to Ms. Mitchell, that ultimate lady of the canyon. Its clever lyrics compress many of Ms. Mitchell's song titles into an unblushing homage.

Vocally, Ms. Wilson evokes a softer, more vulnerable antecedent of Sheryl Crow. Her band — Andrew Doolittle on guitar, Alex Navarro on keyboards, Lee Nadel on bass and Rich Mercurio on drums — captures the radio-ready California sound of those tequila-sunrise mornings.

The biggest difference between Ms. Wilson's songs and those of her teenage idols is the absence in her lyrics of a drifting poetic dreaminess. Ms. Wilson writes in a voice that is mature and forthright. One of her best songs, "Grateful" (not to be confused with John Bucchino's more formal, similarly titled song), bluntly describes being stymied by a lifelong tendency to indulge in destructive self-criticism.

The quarreling couple in "Forgiving Me Forgiving You" distills a stalemate in a domestic relationship with an aphoristic concision: "If I let go of being right/ Can you let go of trying to win?" Ms. Wilson traced her ingrained stubbornness to her Greek and Bulgarian roots.

But whatever its drawbacks, that stubbornness has brought Ms. Wilson to a comfortable artistic perch.

