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MUSIC

Review: Steve Tyrell Keeps a Comfortable Pop-Swing Style in Honoring Sinatra

By STEPHEN HOLDEN DEC. 2, 2015



Steve Tyrell performing at Café Carlyle. Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

[Steve Tyrell](#) has done his homework. At Tuesday’s opening-night performance of his annual end-of-the-year Café Carlyle engagement, this 70-year-old Texan growler performed his second tribute to [Frank Sinatra](#) in the 11 years he has been playing the club. A gruff, gabby charmer who has amassed a loyal following, Mr. Tyrell has the gnarly lived-in voice of an itinerant roustabout familiar with New Orleans blues traditions. Since the days when he was almost a vocal dead ringer for Dr. John, he has become considerably more polished and stylistically savvy.

Mr. Tyrell is developing into an increasingly relaxed pop-swing stylist who pays closer attention to song lyrics. His rendition of “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” was punctuated by an exclamatory “Wake Up,” and all his interpretations were accompanied by vigorous illustrative body language. His rendition of “Nevertheless (I’m in Love With You)” wasn’t a typical rote performance that relied on his grainy vocal timbre to convey authenticity. Relating it to the Sinatra-Ava Gardner breakup, Mr. Tyrell gave it an undertone of confusion and heartache.

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Mr. Tyrell still has a way to go to liberate himself fully from slavery to the downbeat, which can make his interpretations sound mechanical and plodding. That said, songs as beloved as “I Get a Kick Out of You,” “Fly Me to the Moon” and “All the Way” are so familiar they’re a bit like Christmas carols. Inviting you to cozy up to them, they virtually sing themselves. Familiarity breeds affection.

Mr. Tyrell, who said he had become close to the Sinatra family, is a terrific storyteller. And the performance was infused with amusing anecdotes about Sinatra and other Hollywood players.

As usual, his septet provided solid backing. His pianist and musical director, Quinn Johnson, provided fluid keyboard solos, and David Mann’s tenor saxophone added tang. But the arrangements, strong as they were, were undercut by a synthesizer that made a cheesy substitute for strings. Investment in a cello or viola would make an enormous positive difference.