

all about jazz

Linda Tillery At Freight And Salvage

By Walter Atkins
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Seasoned San Francisco Bay Area vocalist Linda Tillery assembled a fine lineup of local musicians, including some decades old friends and a recent new one, to help celebrate her birthday and musical life. Tillery presented a diverse repertoire of blues, jazz, soul, folk and gospel to an overflowing venue of friends and family.

The sold out evening was divided into two satisfying sets. Tillery featured the talented young Brett Bratnatt on guitar for an acoustic/electric session. This was followed by a full band blow out with long time friends: jazz guitarist Ray Obiedo, keyboardist Tammy Hall-Hawkins, bassist Ruth Davies, drummer Leon Joyce, Jr. and percussionist Javier Navarette. This staunch unit gave Tillery an excellent platform for her sparkling vocal excursions all night.

Just a few months earlier, Tillery was teaching at Jazz Camp in La Honda CA when she heard what she assumed to be a veteran blues guitarist. She could not believe Brett Bratnatt, a shy seventeen year old, was the source of the wondrous sounds. When she asked him why he played the blues, he simply replied, "he liked it." She was so impressed with the San Jose youngster's talent, she invited him to celebrate her 67th birthday on stage at the long running Freight and Salvage Coffee House in Berkeley.

The versatile vocalist and her teenaged guitarist then got comfortable in their chairs. Tillery sang and told interesting stories while the quiet Bratnatt alternated between electric and acoustic guitars for each tune. She opened with Keb' Mo's 1994 composition "Am I Wrong." She added, "If you feel it, let it come out of you." With acoustic accompaniment, Tillery glided into the Reverend Gary Davis gospel song "I Heard The Angels Singin'." Her next selection was Muddy Waters' intense "I Want You To Love Me." It was ..."reflective of desperate love" and "loving desperately." Tillery's rich voice was clear and emotive and the FS crowd was captivated.

During the set, Tillery asked her youthful guitarist if he was an "aberration of nature." On the Professor Longhair number "Tippitina," the packed place clapped and tapped its

feet to the music. Tillery played a cajon with brushes on another tune. She threw in a riff from the Beatles' 1963 "I Saw Her Standing There." The celebrated singer performed the traditional hymn "Will The Circle Be Unbroken" with acoustic support by Bratnatt while the audience softly sang and clapped. During the song, Tillery said of her guitarist, "He's so shy he won't take two choruses."

At the break, one of the thrilled customers told her friend that Tillery's ..."wealth of cultural material was wide ranging and ...it's just amazing." When Tillery and the full band came out to start the second session, all the ladies wore fresh Hawaiian leis. She talked about growing up in the City's Fillmore and asked if there were any Lowell High School people in the house. About a half dozen people, including this photojournalist, put their hand up. The vocalist/percussionist asked the Lowellites to meet in the lobby after the show for some group photos.

She introduced one of her "favorite guitarists" and old friend Ray Obiedo. "Known him 40 -45 years and he played great jazz in the 80s...funky stinky guitarist," she said. Tillery had known bassist Davies for about 20 years. Tillery said she wasn't influenced by the greats like Aretha Franklin. Her influences were local artists like Lady Bianca who was also in attendance. She added no one gets there alone and there are a few originals like Leon Joyce Jr. "This guy is clean and always on time" she announced.

Tillery kicked off the second half with Gil Scott-Heron's memorable jazzy "Lady Day and John Coltrane." Obiedo's guitar and Davies' bass formed the ideal foundation for her lush deep vocals to work. Hall stretched out on this fast paced number. Growing up in the 60s with "music of resistance" she said, "most people think of Joan Baez , Bob Dylan or Crosby Stills & Nash." She thought of Nina Simone. Tillery responded to a crowd comment with "Are you from Oakland?" and received a roar from the room. Tonight, she addressed the Viet Nam War and social issues with music from African American composers. Davies was asked to play the bass line from Marvin Gaye's 1971 classic "Inner City Blues." The guitar and percussion solos here were splendid.