

Theater: Marilyn Maye Toasts Sinatra At 54 Below

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MARILYN MAYE -- HER WAY: A TRIBUTE TO FRANK SINATRA *** out of ****
54 BELOW

Do I need to launch a Kickstarter campaign? Somebody, somewhere needs to get [Marilyn Maye](#) into a recording studio, pronto. She's been captured on record (The Lamp Is Low is a great place to start) but not nearly as much as her talent deserves. Rosemary Clooney had a late career resurgence via Concord Records. Shirley Horn burst back into view thanks to Verve. Any record company, any digital startup, any entrepreneur ready to gain some cachet wanna add their label's name to that honorable list? Then put Maye behind a microphone and let the tape roll.

A tribute to Sinatra is an ideal hook for the album. Like Clooney and Frank, Maye can sing and swing with aplomb. And at roughly 87 years old -- as she genially hinted at during the opening night of [her new stand at New York's 54 Below](#) -- Maye still possesses a beautiful tone, great rhythmic chops and the ability to deliver a lyric that only comes with experience. As she joked before delivering "It Was A Very Good Year," when Maye first sang that world-weary song she had no idea what it was about. Now her knowledge of life and her knowledge of singing combine as they only can in the autumn of the year.

The speakeasy vibe of this venue fits Maye to a tee, who's the sort of broad Sinatra appreciated. Standing by the bar right before the show began a few minutes late, Maye turned to the people standing there and said, "Shit!" It was a long rehearsal, she laughed in explanation to the few of us nearby, before launching into the prelude of "Fly Me To The Moon." Clearly, buying her a drink and swapping stories would be almost as much fun as hearing her sing.

Opening night was a bit of an amiable mess, with Maye forgetting some of the lyrics as she navigated very tricky medleys that weaved in and out of various tunes, first one and then the other and then back again, like her "Fly" opener that began with a lovely quiet take on that gem Sinatra recorded with Count Basie and then leaped into the ring-a-ding-ding of "Come Fly With Me" from the album of the same name. She stopped and started again, she joked with the band, and she scatted her way here and there when lyrics weren't at hand -- appropriately enough, once on "The Lady Is A Tramp," which she associates with Ella Fitzgerald as much as Sinatra. And who knew better than Ella how to turn a lost lyric into an opportunity?

The audience loved it, cheering Maye from the start, gamely joining in when she turned "High Hopes" and "Love And Marriage" into sing-alongs and laughing even more when she cut them short, saying, "Ok, that's enough of that!" Maye could do no wrong in their eyes and she rewarded their appreciation with some sublime moments of artistry. But I envy those who show up for night two or three or four of this revue. Once Maye settles into the show, she won't just entertain the way she did on opening night. She'll soar.

Famously praised by Johnny Carson as his favorite "super singer," Maye has toured and performed for decades, from talent shows as a kid to musical theater to finding a home in cabaret and even a Grammy nomination as Best New Artist in 1966 (she and Herman's Hermits and the Byrds and Sonny & Cher all lost to Tom Jones). Now it's time to capture this talent again in the studio. A new album from Maye right now would surely set a record for "longest gap between Grammy nominations."

The best performances of the night would provide the backbone of a Sinatra tribute album that would probably

win a Grammy, too. With her nimble band led by pianist and conductor Tedd Firth, Maye delivered a vibrant "I've Got You Under My Skin." Normally this song is declarative, boastful, even possessive, as if the singer has you under their skin and won't let you go. (Sinatra's classic version with Nelson Riddle is on my short list of the greatest singles of all time.) I've heard it sung fast and slow and everything in between. But Maye made this Cole Porter classic breathe again thanks to a delicate, slinky arrangement that turned it seductive.

I'm not a big fan of medleys so when Maye said the show would contain 42 songs associated with Sinatra, my heart sank a little. Happily, she brought each passage so fully to life I didn't feel the usual disappointment of thinking a song was just getting started before the medley had moved on. Still, if I were helping select tunes for this Sinatra tribute album of my dreams, I'd definitely want to hear Maye do "In The Wee Small Hours Of The Morning" and "It Was A Very Good Year" from start to finish. They're too good and Maye's take on them too moving to trim them in the least.

Nonetheless, the night had one killer "drinking" medley, starting with the wistful "Angel Eyes," segueing into "Drinkin' Again," climaxing with that saloon singer peak "One For My Baby (And One More For The Road)" and then beautifully circling back again to "Angel Eyes" for the fade out on the line, "'Scuse me, while I disappear" with Maye orchestrating her own light cue at the end.

You really can't go wrong when covering Sinatra because he as much as any artist helped define the Great American Songbook. Sinatra quite simply had great taste. Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday and Bing Crosby (the three towering vocalists that preceded him) all sang great tunes. They also sang a lot of junk but did it so well that those rinky-dink songs were transformed into great recordings. But that didn't make them great songs. Sinatra almost never recorded weak ones, Mitch Miller or no Mitch Miller. And his quality control became impeccable once the Capital years began, especially on those groundbreaking albums.

Maye made the most of the rich catalog on tap, packing in a lot of great tunes. Some of her best moments were also her biggest, with Maye kicking up fun and wowing on brassy standards like "Come Rain Or Come Shine," a city medley (with multiple New York tunes, natch) and a rousing "That's Life" which felt positively triumphant. Usually that song is defiant, as if to say the singer won't let the ups and downs ever hold them back. Maye's spin somehow suggested it was the very nuttiness of life that she loved. That's life and ain't it grand?

Still, my favorite of these show-stoppers was "Luck Be A Lady" from Maye's favorite musical Guys & Dolls. She shared a story about a great night when she first worked with her pianist Firth at a tribute show dedicated to songwriter Frank Loesser. Maye challenged him: did he know the song, could he do it in a jazz waltz the way she liked, and did he know the intro? Sure, he said, scrambling to look up info on a laptop. Then he threw her a fastball by tossing in a key change towards the end of her performance without her expecting it. (Apparently, Maye says, she was auditioning him and he was auditioning her.) The arrangement killed then and it kills now. The song is really written for a man, Maye acknowledged. But when you reach her age, she declared to more applause from the crowd, you can do whatever the hell you want. Damn right, especially when you do it so well.

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