

Cassandra Wilson's high standards

The chanteuse makes jazz classics fit her unique style

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Grammy-winning jazz singer Cassandra Wilson is calling from New Orleans, where she's mixing her new album that will come out in early 2008. Being a Mississippi girl, Wilson will speak up for the entire region's musical importance. But you can't help asking, how is the birthplace of jazz post-Katrina?

"It's still difficult," says Wilson, who'll give audiences a sneak peek at her new album when she performs at the Blue Note this Tuesday through Friday. "You can sense uneasiness. At the same time, it's mixed with hope and ebullience. ... There's still that really stark contrast. Once you leave Bourbon Street and venture into [outlying] neighborhoods, you realize there's work to be done."

Wilson is one to roll up her sleeves and keep moving, a self-confessed restless spirit always eager to move on to the next project, the next sound. In a string of acclaimed, best-selling albums, she has expanded the boundaries of jazz by incorporating everything from blues legend Robert Johnson to Neil Young, James Taylor and the Monkees ("Last Train to Clarksville," off her lauded "New Moon Daughter" CD in 1996). But last year, she felt New Orleans was the place for rebirth.

"I've had a rough couple of years, and I haven't been singing enough," says the 51-year-old singer and songwriter. "My mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's three years ago, and then my son had some problems. So I had things going on. No time to work, no time to really practice."

It's a remarkable claim from a woman who has been one of jazz's potent voices for almost two decades, an artist who tweaked convention to the max with her 2006 album "Thunderbird," which shocked purists by using drum loops and other non-jazz sounds. But even before her landmark — and name-making — 1993 album "Blue Light 'til Dawn," Wilson proved with the relatively conventional tunes on 1988's standards CD "Blue Skies" that she was a force to be reckoned with. Now she's singing standards again, but with a newfound confidence and insight.

"There's less emphasis on the technique and being spot-on," Wilson says about the difference in her singing now. "And there's

more of an emphasis on the emotional component, the story that's being told."

One story she's telling is the unfinished business in New Orleans.

"One song I'm doing on the project is 'Wouldn't It Be Lovely,'" says Wilson of the classic tune from "My Fair Lady."

"That's always been a favorite song of mine. I've always loved the sentiment and the emotion. I saw the movie when I was 9 or 10 years old. Yet what helped me to form it emotionally was this context: Being in New Orleans, now.

So many people are still homeless. There are so many plans and so much is going on down here. They're really trying to figure out how to bring back those unfortunate people. It's just such a powerful song

when you place it in that context, when you think about families, whole families, removed. And, really, all they want is to just come back home."

Home for Wilson is now in New York state — Woodstock, to be specific ("Amongst the hippies," as she laughingly puts it). She loved Harlem, where she lived in an apartment once occupied by Duke Ellington, but she and her husband and son have moved away from the hectic life of Manhattan.

"I wanted something quieter," says Wilson, who also admits she wanted the same for her adolescent son. "New York was a little too rough. I want him to be savvy, but ... you can't escape it. If you've got a teenager living in New York, they're going to search for that, no matter what their economic status is or what kind of school they're in. They're going to want to be in

[things] because of the peer pressure.

"I had to pull him out of it to get some perspective. He was 16. It was kind of rough at first, but he likes it now because I can let him be on his own without really worrying about him going to a party [or] that sort of thing."

Woodstock as home for a jazz singer? It makes perfect sense to a woman who relaxes by learning new computer program languages and began by playing folk music when all her friends were listening to R&B.

"I remember when I was 12 and I bought a Monkees album, and all the other kids were saying, 'What are you doing?'" laughs Wilson. "Part of it is me just wanting to be contrary. I realize the older I get that there is something inside of me that just likes to go left when other people are going right. Just to see what's happening." ♦

She puts a new emphasis on the stories in songs.

