

## Stacey Kent Weaves Subtle Spell at Birdland

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“Where melancholy meets hope” is the phrase Stacey Kent uses to describe the wistful love songs written for her by her husband and band leader, Jim Tomlinson, and his writing partner, Japanese-born British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro. It’s also a good description of Kent’s musical aesthetic.

At New York’s Birdland on Dec. 7, the charming, multilingual Kent greeted audience members in English, French and Portuguese, and sang an international repertoire with a gentle intensity and level of nuance that calls to mind great singers of a previous generation. Emotionally precise, and sentimental without being precious, she can be as delicate as Blossom Dearie and as intimate as João Gilberto.

On uptempo numbers Kent rarely improvises, like Peggy Lee, but she can also swing like Lee did. Blessed with a luscious timbre, she combines it with emotionally intelligent phrasing to illuminate and elevate her songs.

Although Kent is well known for her modern renditions of American standards and French chansons (she is so popular in France that in 2009 she was awarded the National Order of Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of Culture), the bossa nova tradition remains her greatest influence. The Birdland gig featured songs from her new album *The Changing Lights* (Warner Bros.), her most overtly Brazilian-themed effort to date. The disc includes new songs as well as classic sambas and bossa novas by Antonio Carlos Jobim, Roberto Menescal, Marcos Valle and other Brazilian masters of the form.

She opened, as on the CD, with an English adaptation of the lilting “Estrada Branca (This Happy Madness)” by Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes, a song usually performed as a dramatic ballad. After a verse accompanied only by Graham Harvey’s discreet piano, the band entered, in a persuasive bossa nova.

Throughout the evening, Tomlinson, a supple tenor and soprano saxophonist and flutist, demonstrated that he is Kent’s musical alter-ego, playing Getz to her Gilberto. The couple are both painters with sound, using just a subtle dab here and there to create little moments of clarity and emotion.

Rounding out the band, which embodied taste and restraint, were Phil Hay on drums and Tom Hubbard on bass.

Two new gems by songwriters Tomlinson and Ishiguro followed. “The Changing Lights” showcased Kent’s remarkable skills as a storyteller. The song, narrating a chance meeting of two former lovers on a busy city street, is redolent of the bittersweet *saudade* of so many great Brazilian songs. It was followed by “The Summer We Crossed Europe In The Rain,” featuring a subtle piano solo by Harvey—one of several by the pianist that might have been *too* tasteful and un-showy to inspire the applause they deserved.

Diving deeply into the bossa nova songbook, Kent swung through Valle’s “The Face I Love,” then



Stacey Kent (Photo: Benoit Peverelli)

covered three Jobim songs, beginning with the haunting “Vivo Sonhando (Dreamer).” When she adds her own finger-picked acoustic guitar to the mix while singing with intimate intensity, it’s easy to grasp her debt to Gilberto and the depth of her talent.

Kent made “How Insensitive” sound like it was written for her. With its great lyric about the end of love, it is the perfect song to express her muse: rueful, melancholy and sophisticated. The Jobim mini-set ended with “One Note Samba.” In the rising-and-falling middle eight of that standard, Kent once again proved her mettle, articulating the notes with flawless precision.

Introducing the bossa nova standard “O Barquinho (The Little Boat),” she described meeting its composer, Menescal, for the first time backstage at a 2011 concert marking the 80th anniversary of the statue of Christ the Redeemer on Corcovado in Rio. Kent, who has become very popular in Brazil, was the only non-Brazilian invited to perform. “As I was coming offstage,” she said, “I bumped into Menescal, who was about to go on. ‘Roberto,’ I said. ‘Stacey,’ he said. I was thrilled to discover that he was a fan of mine.” She has since performed and recorded with Menescal, as well as Valle. Supremely subtle and

tender in her approach, she’s in their league now.

—Allen Morrison