

JOANIE IN JAZZ: FOR THOSE WHO THINK YOUNG

By K. R. "Skoot" Larson

When Joanie Sommers introduced us to The Pepsi Generation in the early '60's, she sang to us how the popular soft-drink was "For those who think young." Seeing Joanie at the Warner Grand last Sunday, where she performed as a part of L.A.'s Women In Jazz series, she must have taken her own advice about 'thinking young.'

Ms. Sommers appeared and sounded just as young and fresh as she did many years ago when she stood in front of a Venice High School dance band. Yes, in those days we had "Dance Bands," that played "Standards," often without even one guitar! "Pop" music covered a broad spectrum of styles that radio disc jockeys referred to as "Middle of the Road."

That was the birth of The Pepsi Generation, and Joanie Sommers was the voice that introduced it to us. She sang those radio jingles that encouraged us to "Come Alive!" and to join "those who think young." Beside the commercials, jazz fans dug her unique style, the way she phrased songs as a musician might put them through a horn, how her voice played with the tones, bending a little here or there, sliding down a half pitch or so on notes held.

Younger fans knew Joanie from "Top 40" material that she performed with equal gusto: "Johnny Get Angry," "One Boy" or "The Theme From A Summer Place."

The styles varied slightly, but Joanie's voice was oh-so recognizable. Her voice had an edge no one else could copy, just an endearing hint of a rasp to it. Maybe that's why we still remember those old Pepsi commercials and her other works so clearly.

Joanie's show Sunday gave us a "time capsule" mix of pop hits, jazz standards, some Brazilian bossa nova, and even a medley of Pepsi Cola jingles from the early days of her career.

Ms. Sommers shared the Warner Grand stage with jazz guitarist Ron Eshte, bassist Luther Hughes, piano wizard Joe Massamino and drummer Paul Kreibich. The band not only added some great solo work behind our Woman in Jazz, but was able to re-create many of moods from across Joanie's career; the bossa nova guitar sound of Jobim's "Meditation," the jazzy feel of "I'm All Smiles" with a final chorus that varied in tempo as Joanie and pianist Massamino slowed to half-time and gradually brought the beat back to speed.

Joanie loves "those old songs," and she love singing. You can see it throughout her performance. She dances in constant motion while her band jazzes up the breaks and stretches out on the middle choruses. When she sings, it's hard to imagine that big, full sound coming

from that petite sparkle-eyed girl in her bright-white pant-suit and diamond earrings, microphone in hand, bouncing around the stage.

While performing her commercial hit, “Johnny Get Angry,” Joanie also introduced a new updated creation titled “Johnny Got Angry,” which put some of those old `60’s puppy love lyrics into a more current perspective.

Although the Warner Grand was far from “filled to capacity,” Joanie Sommers did draw a good size audience of very appreciative fans. “I’m having so much fun up here,” Joanie told her audience more than once, “I could just keep singing all afternoon.”

Judging from the response, her fans would have stayed and even called out for more for as long as the music continued.

Joanie sparkled through songs by the Gershwins, Cole Porter and Jerome Kern. Interacting with her band, Joanie made a medley combining 60’s anthem “The Beat Goes On” with “That Old Devil Moon.” Called back by a standing ovation, Joanie coaxed the band into “I’ve Got The World On A String.” Obviously pleased with herself and her performance, Joanie kidded around with the band as they took there solos, pulling a red handkerchief from guitarist Ron Eshte’s coat pocket and pushing his music stand aside so the audience could watch his fingers running over his instrument’s fret board.

Commercial music hasn’t been kind to “Jazz Singers” in the post Pepsi Generation decades. Pop singers don’t cross over as freely as they did 40 years ago as the MTV generation has a much clearer idea of “youth identity” and what it should entail.

Backstage, Joanie says that it’s a long story, too long to go into.

“I’m writing a book that covers all that.” Joanie laughs, “Isn’t everyone these days?”

The book is just an outline in the works. Joanie’s singing, however, is very real and sounding just as good as those Pepsi days when she was proclaimed the “Most Exciting Voice To Come Along In 15 Years!” If anything, the styling behind the voice has improved with age, honed to a fine jazz instrument.

Keep an on eye on the jazz scene. Joanie states that she’ll be performing locally much more often now with child rearing and other family obligations behind her, and this is one act you shouldn’t want to miss!

Joanie just might be the most exciting voice to come along in the past 50 years.

(from the Long Beach Press Telegram, 1999)

