

Barbara Sfraga and Center Search Quest at Rosalie and Alva's

by Skoot Larson

Anyone who might think there is nothing new in jazz these days hasn't heard Barbara Sfraga and Center Search Quest. With an eclectic sound that this writer could only sum up as "jazz theater," Barbara and the CSQ mesmerized a fair sized audience Sunday night, July 15th, in the intimate setting of Rosalie and Alva's Performance Gallery, San Pedro, California



The Center Search Quest includes vocalist, poet and contrabass artisan Christopher Dean Sullivan, "*soundrhythmium*," the groups own descriptive term for percussion wizard and vocalist Michael "T.A." Thompson, and singer-pianist Mala Waldron, weaving an incredible fabric of sound behind voicist-poetess Barbara Sfraga. The CSQ, at their Alva's performance, was further enhanced by the presence of two fine local sax players: tenorman Steve Catalano and multi-reed wonder Dale Fielder, filling in for CSQ's regular woodwind player Allen Won.

This unique New York based ensemble defies categorization in the traditional pigeonholes of music. The Center Search Quest is firmly rooted in jazz, but with an expansive improvisational style beyond the normal set of "solos" one expects. The CSQ paints their special sound portraits from a palette of spoken word, hard-bop, soul, R&B, new-age harmonics and even a touch of rap upon their colorful audio canvas. Improvisation, however, is the topic throughout. While Barbara and the CSQ amaze us on record, there is still another dimension to their "live" performance in the instantaneous choreography of each individual musician. Sfraga moves about the stage as she plays to her audience; dancing, bending, squatting and mugging while she scats, speaks and sings. Sullivan and T.A. may be fixed to their instruments, but they *act out* their parts just the same, projecting elation, anger, interest, or inquisitiveness as the works unfold.

Much of Center Search Quest's repertoire consists of their own compositions, but playing original music, standards or pop tunes, the ensemble projects the evolution of a jazz vocal sound born over a half century ago with such acts as Lambert, Hendricks and Ross, and the Swe-danes. Tight harmonic vocalizations in constant motion are ever present, even taking on the role of a big band instrumental section comping behind soloing horns.

A good example of the evening's selections is the CSQ's take on the pop classic "Scarborough Faire." Sullivan begins the number with solo bass, soon joined by Waldron's soft piano. Sfraga enters with a low hum the swells to interesting vocalese joined by some minimalist percussive work by T.A. Over three choruses, the chant keeps growing and glowing. Fielder and Catalano add their saxes to the mix and the ensemble is frolicking together in what could be an modern entry in Ken Nordine's fantasy "Sound Museum." Suddenly, the chant erupts into a driving, straight ahead "Scarborough Faire" that puts Simon & Garfunkle's version of the tune to shame. Solos play out over a driving four-four beat and nine parts, counting vocal doubling as separate horns, move as one to birth a fantastic audio rainbow.

Barbara and company also drew special attention with their rendition of another piece of 60s pop-pap, crying out the bouncy old Zombie's hit "She's Not There" as a heart-wrenching torch song.

The CSQ also combined Stevie Wonder's "Tell Me Something Good" in a medley with their original, "One Thang." Here, Sfraga and Sullivan carry on a sort of "scat" conversation reminiscent of Slim Gaillard's old raps or Clark Terry's "Mumbles" in addition to the song's lyrics. The conversation evolves into some street-rap poetry from Sullivan ala Langston Hughes.

A highlight of the evening was Mala Waldron's heartfelt eulogy for her father, jazz legend Mal Waldron, sung as a solo to her own accompaniment. Waldron's emotion and dynamics commanded the attention of her audience throughout her beautiful composition, a moving tribute to an exceptional man and musician.

One of the marks of a true artist is constant growth and change. Barbara Sfraga, who describes herself as a *voicist*, is one of the most interesting performers on today's jazz scene. She began her recording career with an ability to put her own spin on any

material she attempted. On her first CD, “Oh, What a Thrill,” (1998) Sfraga took the Jerry Lee Lewis rockabilly classic, “Great Balls of Fire,” and slowed it down to a soulful lament signaling that this lady wasn’t just another girl singer.

That same spunky flare for making each song her own followed her into her second disc, “Under the Moon,” on which she wove her magic touch into songs by such diverse composers as Hoagy Carmichael, Duke Ellington, and Bob Dylan.



Merging her talents into Center Search Quest has further released Sfraga from whatever limited constraints being a “female singer with a jazz group” might put on a performer, and accelerated her individual style far beyond any hint of “ordinary.” The lady’s use of her microphone, rotating it before her to add dynamics and accentuate certain sounds or syllables, compliments the tones that emanate from her lips and larynx. Beyond traditional “scat” patterns, Sfraga employs other diverse phonics and intonations to express feelings from deep within.

The concept of the Center Search Quest was born in 1989 when Sullivan and T.A. combined their talents to seek out a new direction for musical expression. Sullivan describes their cooperative efforts as, “a search for the center of sound and vibration,” stating that, “This ensemble taps into each other's spirit in such a way that their improvisations become spontaneous compositions.”

Barbara was drawn into the project in 2002 after hearing Sullivan and T.A. perform in a Harlem nightclub. In 2004, Waldron began collaborating with T.A. on new material for the CSQ, leading to her entry into the ensemble along with saxophonist Allen Won. Won was not present on the Alva’s performance, having other commitments. Fielder and Catalano did justice to Won’s saxophonic parts.

Together, these stylists form a powerful and sensational jazz entity with a sound apart from any other established unit on the scene. Watching them weave their spell is an evening of ambrosia, Nirvana or other ecstatic states of mind.

Barbara Sfraga and Center Search Quest have promised a return visit to Southern California, possibly as soon as October of this year. When this quintet of geniuses returns, it will be a “must-see” event!