

## The Temecula Merc Shows Hart and Soul

by Skoot Larson

Hart and Soul, a trio combining the expressive vocal styling of Jennifer Hart, the voice and piano of Liew Matthews, and the intriguing bass work of Benjamin May wove their harmonic spell over a capacity crowd Last Thursday, April 17, at the Mercantile Room of the Old Town Temecula Community Theater.



After a short teasing blues number from Matthews and May, Jennifer Hart came center stage to open the evening's vocal offerings with Rodgers and Hart's "Where or When." For those of you unfamiliar with Jennifer Hart, the lady fills any room with a crystal clear and well-announced intonation spanning some three octaves.

The mischief of Matthews and May keep the audience on their toes. Both pianist and bass man share a sophisticated musical sense of humor, often feeding off one another, adding another dimension to the ensemble.

On "I'll Remember April," for example, May's bass quoted the tune's theme a couple times out of the context of the chord changes where you would expect these notes to fall, but with a perfect harmonic fit. May used his bow often throughout the evening, executing fine arco solos with the precision of a concert violinist holding his ax under his chin, though his big elephant remained firmly planted on the floorboards.

Some especially bright moments of the show were the vocal duets of Hart and Matthews. Melodies like "Side By Side" and "I Wish I were in Love Again," were transformed into musical plays as singer and pianist lent a conversational feel to the lyrics they shared.

Jennifer Hart is very much a performing artist, her acting abilities coming through every lyric with this articulate singer emoting each tune's personal message. "Ten Cents A Dance," another song from the pen of Rodgers and Hart, provided a brilliant example of Hart's full stage presence, as she transported her audience back to an old "taxi-dance"

ballroom of the 1930s. Matthews toyed with the tones as well here, tossing in some waltz time against Hart's 4/4 lament.

Liew Matthews, having served tenure as accompanist to Nancy Wilson, is a perfect backer for Hart, or any singer. Matthews has mastered the art of providing support, and even a touch of fun, without overpowering, or drawing attention away from the *chanteuse* in the spotlight. Matthews is also a master of pianistic impressions. In the center of a very *Liew Matthews* chorus, you might suddenly find yourself hearing the distinctive styling of Errol Garner, George Shearing or even Oscar Petersen.

Hart and Soul demonstrates a remarkable simpatico among its three members. Any number of times throughout their Thursday night performance the audience witnessed one player catching another's thoughts and constructing a new complimentary riff to harmonize or embellish his partner's idea.

A highlight of this, and any, Hart and Soul performance is Jennifer Hart's remarkably positive blues composition, "When Life Gets This Darn Good You Lose the Right to Sing the Blues!" To close the evening's first set, Hart got down, or in this case *levitated up*, to some traditional blue changes with a very clever twist. Poking a melodic finger at Shirley McClain and Hollywood New Age groupies in general, Hart tells a tale of her life becoming so magically perfect in every way, that she is no longer permitted to sing the old "down and out" story associated with this twelve-bar structure.

Another solid crowd pleaser came in the form of an Ellington tribute featuring two of the Duke's best-known creations, "Satin Doll" and "In a Mellow Tone." Rather than doing the tribute as a medley, Jennifer Hart began "In a Mellow Tone," while Liew Matthews interwove his vocalization of "Satin Doll" as a counterpoint refrain.

Jennifer Hart, Liew Matthews and Benjamin May performed their delightful musical spectacle as part of the City of Temecula's **Jazz at the Merc** series. Singer Sherry Williams' hosts this exemplary weekly venue, presenting live jazz every Thursday at 7:30 in the Mercantile Room of the Old Town Temecula Community Theater. Additional information about **Jazz at the Merc**, along with a calendar of upcoming performers, can be found at <http://tickets.temeculatheater.org/eventperformances.asp?evt=244>.

More about Jennifer Hart and Hart and Soul is available at <http://www.jenniferhart.net>. Hart and Soul can be heard on Tuesday evenings at Brussels Bistro in Laguna Beach.

