

Sue Palmer

and her Motel Swing Orchestra: The Thunderbird Sessions

By Michael Head



As new as Anthony Cullins is, on the other end of the spectrum is Sue Palmer. She is a long time, venerable San Diego talent with 13 albums, that I counted, to her credit. Known as the “Queen of Boogie-Woogie” she simply sets the standard for authentic boogie-woogie piano, swing and blues. She is a nationally accomplished performer, composer, recording artist and has been a sideman/session player for stars such as Candy Kane, Kim Wilson, Marcia Ball, Toni Price, The Paladins, Roy Gaines, Rosie Flores, Big Sandy and the FlyRite Boys, Dave Alvin, Cesar Rosas (Los Lobos), Earl Thomas, Del Rey, Lea Delaria, Pussy Tourette, Buddy Blue, Rod Piazza & the Mighty Fliers. Heady musical company indeed.

The Thunderbird Sessions is a live, in-studio recording and video, made in front of an enthusiastic audience, into a CD and accompanying video. It was partially the brainchild of Thunderbird Recording Studio owner Thomas Yearsley and Laura Jane Willcock, lead singer of the local band Tighten Ups. Also featured is a local “who’s who” of San Diego jazz and blues musicians, including just for starters, vocalist Deejha Marie Pope, April West on trombone, Jonny Viau on tenor sax and guitarist Steve Wilcox.

What resulted is a high energy, emotion charged video and recording in front a appreciative and musically educated crowd.

Pope leads things off on vocals with a Palmer original, “Ladies Shoes”. It’s a slow blues burner as Palmer’s trademark tasty piano stabs intermingle with Viau’s thick, assertive sax. The guitar solo takes two well deserved rounds and by the time the third verse hits, the crowd is on their collective feet. Another Palmer original “No Vacancy” has a classy, timeless quality that could have come right from the Bayou. That it came from Palmers’ mind is no surprise and her piano is flawless. The horns are like musical street signs pointing the way thru Bourbon Street.

Pope’s daughter, Sharifah, even joins the fun on three R&B standards, showcasing her deep gospel flavored voice on “That’s How I Feel About You,” “I’m Blue,” and the Ruth Brown hit “Mama He Treats Your Daughter Mean.” By the time you reach the near finale “I’m Blue” you realize what a joy this album must have been to make for the musicians and audience alike. I bet they all slept well when it was over.

Several well known covers are approached on the album. “Harlem Nocturne” is the five boroughs and the New York skyline brought to musical life. “Tutti Frutti”, “Cow Cow Boogie” and “Honeysuckle Rose” are well worn, but welcome additions. It would be easy for these songs to fall into cliché, but they are expertly handled by the entire crew.

The album closes with “Jakob’s Boogie Woogie Lullaby” another swinging, medium-tempo Palmer original that displays her expertise and deserved title as the “Queen of Boogie-Woogie.” It’s a nifty instrumental that leaves the crowd crying for more. It’ll do the same to the listener. Though her sound transcends geography, Sue Palmer is both a major San Diego musical influence, and a national treasure.

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