

Alma Smith: The Countess Of Swing

Contributed by Jim Gallert
Thursday, 13 March 2008
Last Updated Thursday, 13 March 2008

Alma Smith has been a professional musician for more than fifty years. The youngest of nine children, Alma was born in Montgomery, Alabama and raised in the North End area of Detroit. Alma's fascination with music started early. Her mother had played piano as a youngster and she encouraged Alma to continue.

"My brother played very good boogie-woogie, but he died young," she recalls. "And my sister could play. But I was the one that made music my livelihood."

Alma's keyboard prowess was recognized early on, and she received lessons when her family could support them. Alma went to Cass Technical High School as a music major and also honed her dancing skills by taking lessons from La Claire Knox.

"I appeared in Carmen and Aida at the Detroit Institute of Arts with the Black Opera Guild. I also played piano after school in a band called King's Aces."

Alma's influences on piano were, and remain, Errol Garner, Art Tatum, Nat Cole and Fats Waller.

Detroit is a breeding ground for excellent musicians, particularly pianists. During the early 1940s, when Alma came of age, the city spawned many fine jazz trios. The widespread use of microphones and improved sound systems allowed pianists to play with a lighter touch. These developments also altered the "traditional" piano trio make-up of piano, bass and drums to one that could produce a more subtle sound: Piano, guitar and bass. Nat "King" Cole and Clarence Profit pioneered this new format in the late 1930s.

Detroit featured several trio's styled after Cole's group, one of which was the Evans-Faire Trio, an up-and-coming group consisting of guitarist John Faire, bassist Curtis Wilder (brother of trumpeter Joe), and pianist Reuben Evans. Reuben later lost his hearing and the guys needed a replacement who could play piano. In addition to the novelty aspect of a mixed gender trio, Curt and John figured they wouldn't have to buy band uniforms for Alma, and they were correct, as her mother and sisters bought her "beautiful evening gowns". The musicians changed the group's name to The Counts and Countess. She convinced her mother to let her go 'on the road', and the band set off to Cleveland, where they followed Art Tatum.

They worked their way west to Los Angeles, where they remained for the next four years. Alma's talents blossomed with the group.

"I played piano and vibes and did a little singing—very little singing, 'cause I was kind of shy." She also wrote material for the group, including "I'm A Barfly", "I've Got A Man", and "Everybody's Got Somebody, But Where Is The One For Me".

Alma raised hell playing her vibes, especially on "Flying Home", generating enough swing during one theater job to stop the show. "Someone in the audience yelled, 'Lionel Hampton, take off that dress!', she laughs."

The band stayed on the West Coast nearly five years and rarely returned to Detroit. L.A. had many lounges and 'cocktail rooms' during the 1940s and work was plentiful, especially for a group built around the sound of local favorite Nat Cole. They played the best white lounges, occasional theater engagements, recorded for two local firms and made three Soundies. The Counts and Countess disbanded in 1948.

Back in Detroit, Smith quickly found work in a quartet at the Parrot Lounge led by ex-Basie clarinetist/saxophonist Rudy Rutherford. She quit following a disagreement with Rutherford over what Smith perceived as a lack of professional courtesy to a bandmember. She began gigging as a single, a new challenge for her. The poise and confidence so evident in Alma's bandstand deportment today were initially lacking but quickly developed. Her easy manner with an audience and pleasant singing voice helped make her an unqualified success wherever she appeared. In addition, her swinging piano style attracted jazz devotees. Alma offers something for everyone when she plays, a philosophy she knew would keep her working. "I'm a practical person," she explains. "I'd rather be somewhere playing music than standing on my feet at Hudson's all day."

Like many young musicians, Alma took to bebop upon first hearing it, and when Dizzy Gillespie's orchestra was in town, tenor saxophonist Lucky Thompson (then a member of the band) carried her to rehearsals. "I loved Dizzy Gillespie and

Charlie Parker," she says. "But I was not in the arena to play that kind of music." Alma secured bookings in Cleveland as a single and soon formed her own trio. She also bought a Hammond B-3 organ and practiced diligently, so that in three months "I had some of the best organ jobs in Cleveland."

Alma made frequent trips to Detroit to be near her family and finally moved back in 1964. She settled into the music scene, working as a single at hotels and restaurant. The Alma Smith Trio was resident at the Rhinoceros Club off-and-on for over fifteen years (1979-1994). Smith spent fifteen years as a piano jack-of-all-trades (accompanist/instructor/performer) in the Detroit Public School system, and she got great satisfaction from helping youngsters develop as musicians.

Alma has worked diligently to maintain a presence on the jazz scene. Her trio (Bert Myrick, drums and Will Austin, bass) appear regularly at Baker's Keyboard Lounge, and she began last year to lecture on jazz history courses at area Colleges.

Alma has kept her sense of humor and upbeat outlook on life. She always has plans and seizes opportunities as they present themselves. Her personal philosophy is summed up in one of her many compositions, "Time Won't Stop And Change Keeps On Coming", the essence of which is: Trust your feelings, believe in yourself, take advantage of your opportunities. Because time won't stop and change keeps on coming. A profound thought, indeed.