

About Ava Logan

It takes a bit of courage to step into the shoes of a legend – and not just any old legend, but one of the most beloved vocalists since the dawn of American popular song. But if starring in *Ella Fitzgerald First Lady of Song* a decade ago was at all daunting for Ava Logan, you couldn't tell it from her shimmering performance in the show, produced by Chicago's Black Ensemble Theater. Capturing Ella in mid-career, Logan showed off her "powerhouse voice," wrote *Chicago Sun-Times* theater critic Hedy Weiss, and "sophisticated" style.

Portraying Ella proved an important step in Logan's development as a jazz artist, as did playing Nancy Wilson in another BET production, *Dynamite Divas*. Logan has always had a great voice – one that no less a judge of jazz singing than the great Sheila Jordan called "lovely." But it was her ability to absorb the signature styles of Ella and Nancy – and Sarah and Carmen and Dinah – that took Logan where she wanted to go as an artist. To that point where her influences are ingredients in her own recipe for success, and Ava Logan is a striking original in her own right.

You can hear her coming into her own on *So Many Stars*, her 2008 debut album. Produced by and featuring acclaimed guitarist Henry Johnson, the recording reflects a musical savvy and easy authority that set Logan apart from the legion of jazz singers who have never gone beyond mere imitation. Wrote veteran jazz critic and radio voice Neil Tesser, "Ava Logan offers a fresh breath of old-school glamour, bringing sass and swing to the classic jazz singer's repertoire while retaining the swanky class that this material deserves. Throw in her superb intonation, and her willingness to always serve the song, and you get a most impressive debut."

Logan hasn't been stingy in sharing her gift. In addition to performing in clubs and concert halls in Chicago, Los Angeles and Florida, she has taken her act to Paris and Rome and Moscow. She has performed one-woman tributes to Fitzgerald, Lena Horne and other favorites. In the process, she has acquired a devoted following that has lifted her into the ranks of must-hear Chicago jazz divas including Dee Alexander, Patricia Barber and Bobbi Wilsyn.

A native of Washington, D.C., Logan grew up hearing the great ladies of jazz – and great male crooners, too, including Nat King Cole – via her father's record collection. But it took her a while to start singing jazz herself. At Yale, she was trained in classical music and was part of the founding edition of Whim 'n Rhythm, an all-female a capella group that is the counterpart of the all-male Whiffenpoofs.

At the University of Pennsylvania, Logan acquired an advanced degree in veterinary medicine, leading to a career as a research specialist in that field – not your usual background for a jazz artist, to say the least, but not without precedent. The great jazz pianist Denny Zeitlin is a practicing psychiatrist and respected clarinetist Ron Odrich, who has played with the legendary likes of Clark Terry and Phil Woods, is a periodontist. After moving to Chicago, Logan began working as a veterinarian by day and singer at night. If she ever entertained thoughts of giving up jazz and its risky career aspects to fully devote herself to her profession, a few sessions with pianist Gene Esposito quieted those thoughts.

A veteran arranger and bandleader adored by singers, Esposito heard something special in Logan. "He told me he didn't want me to be just another chick singer," she said. "He wanted to help me develop a real jazz sensibility." One of the approaches he took was to have her sing tunes from outside the standard female jazz singer repertory – songs she wasn't familiar with and therefore would have to relate to on her own terms. Some of the songs were not often performed. After taking them on, Logan knew why. "They're hard to learn!" she said, laughing. "And hard to sing!"

By the time she worked with her second key mentor, Henry Johnson, Logan was ready for her artistic breakthrough. In Johnson, she had someone who was accustomed to being around jazz singing royalty: he was a cog in the bands of both Joe Williams and Nancy Wilson. Like Esposito, he pushed her out of her comfort zone and got her to take on neglected songs like "The Grass is Greener," recorded in the mid-'60s by Blossom Dearie, and "Wild is the Wind," a film theme previously recorded by Johnny Mathis and Nina Simone.

"I think Ava projects qualities on this album that she didn't have before," said Johnson, who shares a vocal duet with her on Billy Strayhorn's haunting "Day Dream."

So Many Stars, featuring the classy rhythm section of pianist Larry Novak, bassist Larry Gray and drummer Leon Joyce, is full of unexpected vocal shifts and shadings. Logan brings the same sense of surprise to the familiar material like Johnny Mercer's "Day in, Day Out" and Hammerstein-Kern's "The Song is You" that she brings to the "rarities." As prolific jazz writer Scott Yanow wrote, "She comes up with subtle ways to make the songs come alive."

"The thing about Henry is that the things he was able to teach me I used right away," said Logan. She was so secure in her jazz sensibility that that he encouraged her to

revisit the R&B side of her talent – the side indebted to Chaka Khan and Aretha Franklin. In her concerts, Logan has confidently connected the dots between styles. Among the singers she channeled in her acclaimed show, "Girls Night Out!," were Diana Ross ("Baby Love"), Natalie Cole ("Inseparable"), Barbra Streisand ("Evergreen"), Diana Krall ("The Look of Love"), Roberta Flack ("The First Time I Saw Your Face") and, perhaps most courageously, Whitney Houston ("Saving All My Love for You" and, refusing to back down from an "untouchable" hit, "I Will Always Love You").

"I'm a jazz singer first and foremost," said Logan, "but I love all kinds of music. These songs never stop inspiring me to find something fresh in them. As long as I bring honest emotion to them, I don't think there's anything I can't try and make my own."