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is
EASY

*Jazz vocalist Emma
Smith on paying tribute
to Ella Fitzgerald at
Fulham Palace*

Words MADELEINE HOWELL

Fulham Palace is set to host Emma Smith at Jazz on the Lawn



The time to celebrate jazz is now, as 2017 marks the centenary of the birth of the legendary *Summertime* singer Ella Fitzgerald. Fortunately for us, south west London is home to a thriving live scene, with Battersea's 606 Club continuing to take centre stage as a platform for both established and emerging talent.

Over the last weekend of July, the 606 Club will join forces with Fulham Palace to present Jazz on the Lawn in the open air. Now in its ninth year, the event attracts over a thousand jazz lovers who flock to the grounds to enjoy the weekend's accessible mix of jazz, standards, groove, soul and Latin sounds.

The evening of Friday 28 July will usher in a performance from RB Funkestra, an 8-piece group led by BBC Two's Stefan Redtenbacher. The authoritative band is high-energy, featuring powerful vocals from Helena-May Harrison (also of Afro Cluster and Kokomo) and a fiery two-horn frontline.

On Saturday 29 July, the Emma Smith Quintet will take to the stage to pay tribute to Fitzgerald and mark the centenary, and also to celebrate the 80th birthday of blues star Nancy Wilson.

'I've prepared a set of new arrangements to the classic songs that people know and love,' says Smith. 'We'll be playing super uplifting, joyful jazz music that's accessible on every level. It isn't too pretentious, but it also challenges the listener.'

Best known as a member of close harmony trio The Puppini Sisters (Smith describes their style as pop/punk/swing), Smith also presents

Jazz Now on BBC Radio along with Soweto Kinch and Al Ryan. Ella Fitzgerald, she says, was the first jazz singer she ever listened to. 'She changed the game for me. She's the reason why I do this,' she explains. 'Her sound is silly and fun, but also deep and intelligent. So Fitzgerald was the catalyst, but then Nancy Wilson took it a step further in terms of dramatic delivery.'

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The 606 Club hosts lesser known and emerging acts



Another major influence, she admits, is Jimi Hendrix. ‘He’s one of the greatest improvisers that ever lived. He was rebellious, natural and creative – which is how I try to improvise. I’ve also been in love with Dexter Gordon all my life. He was a saxophonist who played really melodic improvised solos.’

While jazz runs in Smith’s blood (her grandfather was trombone player Chris Smith Senior, who played with Frank Sinatra, Shirley Bassey and Barbra Streisand, while her father plays the trumpet and her mother the saxophone), she also credits the 606 Club itself with nurturing her talent from a young age, and continues to hold it in high regard today. Just last year, proprietor and musician Steve Rubie celebrated his 40th year of running it and maintaining its reputation as London’s favourite jazz cellar.

‘He’s been resolute in putting on live music with local musicians as well as international musicians,’ explains Smith. ‘It’s a platform for unknown artists, which is almost shocking in this day and age. Most people don’t want to take risks. If it wasn’t for Steve hearing me sing at the age of 15 and giving me a gig there, I don’t know how much motivation I would have had. The club continues to have a spirit of generosity in showcasing new talent, and old talent too, heritage British jazz which perhaps isn’t so exciting to new promoters or new clubs. It has an authenticity and a loyalty that is unheard of.’

The club continues to have a spirit of generosity in showcasing new talent

Of course, you’ll also often find her in Streatham at the popular jazz, blues, soul and comedy club Hideaway, or singing at the extra late show at the infamous Ronnie Scott’s up in Soho.

‘I’m always getting up on that stage,’ she laughs. ‘Everyone turns up and just makes music for the joy of it.’

For Smith, jazz is a community-based genre which should always be ‘risky and rebellious’ – and that’s a spirit that seems is still very much alive today here in south west London.

Visit fulhampalace.org/events to book tickets



THE BEST JAZZ, SWING & BLUES IN SW LONDON

LE QUECUMBAR & BRASSERIE

This nostalgic, Parisian-style brasserie on Battersea High Street is a favourite of Cressida Bonas and is dedicated to live gypsy swing primarily influenced by Django Reinhardt, but also inspired by the gypsy music of Spain and the Balkans. There’s live music throughout the week, and every Tuesday there’s a free jamming session until 11pm. There’s always a musical surprise behind its secret doors.

42-44 Battersea High Street SW11 3HX; 020 7787 2227; quecumbar.co.uk



THE 606 CLUB

Having fostered the careers of Jamie Cullum, Kit Downes and Liane Carroll to name a few, the 606 Club has existed as a celebrated jazz club and restaurant for more than 30 years. It’s an intimate setting that attracts a diverse crowd. It’s open to non-members, and is also available for private hire.

90 Lots Road SW10 0QD; 020 7352 5953; 606club.co.uk

HIDEAWAY

Streatham’s Hideaway is an award-winning, 250 capacity swing, jazz, funk and soul venue with a varied programme of British and international artists. It showcases new talent and star performers alike. Don’t miss out on tickets for Mica Paris and the Atlantic Soul Orchestra this month.

2 Empire Mews, Stanthorpe Road SW16 2BF; 020 8835 7070; hideawaylive.co.uk

THE BLUES KITCHEN

This restaurant and late night bar in Brixton serves up Texan barbecue food and American cocktails with a side order of blues, with live bands and DJs playing vintage funk and soul every Friday and Saturday until 2am.

40 Acre Lane, Brixton SW2 5SP; 020 7274 0591; theblueskitchen.com