

BERKELEY: At Jazz festival, today's divas to toast the greats of yesterday – Ella, Billie, Dinah

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Andrew Gilbert, special to the Chronicle

Tap your feet, snap your fingers, even give a resounding whoop of joy, and the librarians in Berkeley will smile in approval. At least that's the way it will work next weekend, when the Berkeley Public Library's 11th free Jazz Festival turns the downtown branch's Central Reading Room into the hippest jazz joint in the Bay Area.

Billed as a "Tribute to the Divas," the festival features a triumvirate of the East Bay's finest singers, **Denise Perrier**, **Faye Carol** and **Frankye Kelly**, celebrating three of swingdom's greatest vocalists, **Dinah Washington**, **Billie Holiday** and **Ella Fitzgerald**, respectively.

The festival opens on Thursday evening with a lecture and video presentation by **Dee Spencer**, the pianist and San Francisco State professor of music who has worked with SFJAZZ's **All-Star High School Ensemble**. Spencer will offer an overview of the distinctive contributions and enduring influence of the three honored singers.

"The impact of those classic vocalists on music and jazz is just endless," said Spencer. "That's why we keep going back to them. We try to get away, and we just keep coming back. When other vocalists start singing, we start comparing them to Dinah, Billie and Ella, and that tells us something right there."

The festival, sponsored by the Friends of the Library, is run by librarian **Patricia Mullan**, a journeywoman trombonist who plays with the Montclair Women's Big Band. Founded in 1989, the event has featured some of the region's finest musicians over the years, focusing either on particular composers and bandleaders, such as **Duke Ellington**, **Thelonious Monk** and **Count Basie**, or wider themes, such as salsa and Latin jazz, the birth of the blues and the role of the trombone in jazz.

With seating for about 225 in the Central Reading Room, the festival often draws a standing-room audience that spills out into the lobby.

"What I'm going for is community access to the arts," Mullan says. "Musicians can sell their CDs, and we get this nice cross section of folks, many of whom go to **Yoshi's**, and many of whom can't afford to."

In an apt added feature that highlights the way that the jazz torch is handed down from one generation to the next, each featured singer has selected a student or protege to open for her.

Frankye Kelly, who headlines on June 5, is focusing on the legacy of Ella Fitzgerald, a fitting choice given Kelly's bright, clear voice and love of American Songbook standards (she also headlines at Yoshi's on June 13).

Her latest album is "Live at Yoshi's/Songs For My Father," and she'll be performing with the soulful pianist **Tammy Hall**, bassist **Michael Olivola** and drummer **Marlon Green**. **Sandra Pitts-Johnson** opens the show with a brief set.

"Frankye is very dynamic on stage," says Spencer, who has accompanied all three singers over the years. "She's got a very strong stage presence and can really mold an audience."

The festival's free concerts start on June 3 with the stylish chanteuse Denise Perrier, who is paying tribute to Dinah Washington. Like Washington, Perrier can belt the blues with authority and deliver an intimate ballad as if she were relating a story from her own life.

"Denise has this wonderfully warm voice," Spencer says. "Listening to her is like sipping the best glass of wine you ever had in your life. You savor every note that comes out of her mouth."

Born in Louisiana and raised in Albany, Perrier grew up in a house suffused with music. Her stepbrother, **Paul Jackson Jr.**, is the highly regarded bassist best known as a founding member of **Herbie Hancock's** pioneering fusion band Headhunters, and her stepsister, **Joyce Jackson**, is an accomplished flutist and songwriter.

Since she first started singing professionally in the late 1950s, Perrier has mostly worked outside the Bay Area. Performing in Las Vegas in the early '60s, she learned her craft alongside such legends as Washington and Fitzgerald.

In recent years, she has found an enthusiastic new audience in Russia, where she's traveled numerous times. Her latest album is "Blue Monday Party," recorded live at Yoshi's. Perrier performs with Hall, bassist **Eric Hunt** and drummer **Jack Dorsey**. Candace, a gifted young singer who goes by one name and recently moved to the Bay Area from Philadelphia, will open the show.

Berkeley vocalist Faye Carol is the main attraction on June 4, with a show dedicated to Billie Holiday. A charismatic performer, Carol is versed in a wide array of African American vocal styles.

"The great thing about Faye is that her spirit is so incredibly vast," Spencer says. "She hits that stage and immediately you're feeling something. You don't know what it is, but you're feeling something. The first time I worked with her, I was a little intimidated. I had heard what a perfectionist she is, but it was such an incredible experience. She gets deep inside the music."

While Carol never had a chance to actually hear Holiday sing (Lady Day died in 1959, at the age of 44), she was introduced to her music by **Martha Young**, the niece of the tenor great **Lester Young**, who provided beautiful solos on many of Holiday's classic recordings in the 1930s.

"Martha was a great pianist, and we met when our churches came together for a **fashion** show," says Carol, who also performs at Yoshi's on June 20. "I didn't know anything about anything except what was coming over the radio. She said, 'You've got to listen to this,' and played me some Lady Day. At first I didn't hear it. I was used to your big belters, **Mahalia Jackson**, **Aretha Franklin**, **Gladys Knight**, even **Barbra Streisand**. But I was always open to all kinds of music, and one day I had this epiphany, and I heard what Billie was doing with her voice. It was subtle but she was telling her own stories so beautifully."

When she's not performing, Carol teaches jazz, blues and R&B classes at the **Black Repertory Theater** in Berkeley. Some of her advanced students will be performing at the Black Rep on June 10. For her library concert, Carol is working with pianist **Fred Harris**, bassist Hashima and drummer **Darrell Green**.

Jazmin Noble, a student of Carol's who has been studying with her for several years at the Black Rep, opens the library show, the latest link in a chain that runs back to Lady Day, Dinah and Ella.

Live

-- 7 p.m. Thursday through June 5, Berkeley Public Library, 2090 Kittredge St., Berkeley. Free. (510) 981-6100;

www.berkeleypubliclibrary.org.

-- Yoshi's is at Jack London Square, 510 Embarcadero W., Oakland. (510) 238-9200.

-- The Black Repertory Theater, 3201 Adeline St., Berkeley. (510) 652-2120.