



Club Scene

Candace Evans returns to her roots—and tickling the ivories around town.

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Candace Evans is tiny—at five-feet-two-and-one-half inches tall, the diminutive jazz musician often perches on pillows to make her taller at the piano—similar to Erroll Garner, who performed sitting on multiple phone directories. But the voice that emerges from Evans when she opens her mouth to sing has a commanding presence—think Billie Holiday or Diana Krall. Her voice isn't smoky like Holiday's or as sumptuous as Krall's—Evans instead has a mesmerizing delivery that has been described as a warm-as-cognac “blend of sweet, sensuous and sultry,” similar to Blossom Dearie, who was known for her girlish voice.

Though casually dressed for today's interview, Evans, who recently moved back to Overland Park following a four-year gig at The Lodge of the Four Seasons in the Lake of the Ozarks, exudes the part of a jazz songstress. Expressive, elegant and passionate as she talks about her musical journey, inspirations and role models, Evans has the relaxed demeanor of a veteran performer.

“Kansas City is a jazz town, and I love it,” says Evans, who started taking classical piano lessons and theory at age 8 from a legendary KC teacher, Julliard-trained Berta Eisberg.

“Mrs. Eisberg was tough, and I was a kid who some days just didn't want to practice,” laughs Evans.

But Evans credits her mother, Audrey, for sustaining her musical interest: she kept dragging her daughter to piano, voice and dance lessons, affording the blossoming musician a solid background that has served as a foundation for success. Audrey and Evans' father, Dave, exposed her to the Kansas City Philharmonic, Kansas City's first symphony orchestra, concerts and the theatre and she soaked up the music of their era. In fact, Evans calls herself an old soul when it comes to her taste—Nat King Cole's “Stardust,” Frank Sinatra in his Capitol Years, Holiday's torch songs, Gershwin's “Porgy and Bess.”

“One of the first recordings that I remember impacting me,” says Evans, hugging herself as if she has a chill, “and I still get goose bumps when I hear it—was ‘Rhapsody in Blue.’ It was Peter Nero and the Boston Pops. I was hooked.”

Another major influence was the impeccable Barbra Streisand, whose debut in “Funny Girl” remains Evans' chart-topping must-see and see-again film.

After those transformative experiences—of personally identifying with a performer's passion, whether it was the Pops or Streisand—going to the weekly tutorials at Mrs. Eisberg's became a bit easier. The student was finally willing to let her talent develop wings. Throughout high school Evans played at festivals, recitals and was cast as Laurie in a production of “Oklahoma.” Her childhood and teen diaries are filled with entries of her love of music—and animals.

“I wanted to grow up to be a veterinarian or a musician,” says Evans, who had horses and dogs as a child and during her time in the Ozarks took up rescuing cats. “Bareback riding was my favorite thing, but music ranked right up there.”

Music kept nudging its way into the forefront of Evans' life, and after college she pursued it as a career. Evans had a two-year engagement at the Marriott Hotel at Barney Allis Plaza downtown, playing in the lobby and lounge and then signed on for five years at the Ritz-Carlton on the Country Club Plaza (now the InterContinental). She entertained Sunday brunch goers with her sweet melodies, and played the Oak Room lounge at night. Fellow musicians like KC greats Angela Hagenbach and Joe Cartwright played there, too, and Evans felt she was part of a close-knit community.

One night she was invited by Greg Halstead, the original owner of one KC's landmark clubs, Jardine's, to sit in and play. That pivotal jam session was when Evans realized that if she wanted to make a living playing music in KC, she had to know jazz. The eager student, now an adult, studied jazz and jazz vocals with Carol Comer, an internationally known composer, teacher, writer, pianist and singer and the KC correspondent for *Down Beat* magazine.

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Evans took to the genre easily, transitioning from semi-classical and Broadway standards into the music her hometown helped put on the map. She started singing some of her idols' tunes—Cole Porter classics that she adapted to her style—and incorporated contemporary artists like Billy Joel and Elton John into her repertoire. The niche that Evans carved out in the club scene was comfortable, and audiences responded favorably to her performances and pleasing personality.

Relocating to Overland Park in early summer with her husband of 20 years, country club general manager Michael Mally, 10-year-old daughter Kristin, and Wolfie and Mitzi—two felines that are products of her rescue efforts—Evans is excited to be back amongst professional friends.

“Tim Whitmer, David Basse, Lonnie McFadden, Angela ... they're all doing incredible things here, along with so many others,” says Evans.

Her colleagues echo her sentiments.

SPOTLIGHT: CANDACE EVANS

“Candace is an integral part of the KC jazz scene,” says Basse, a beloved KC jazz musician who recently played at the opening of KC’s newest jazz club, 1911 Restaurant and Lounge, in the Crossroads. “It’s great to have her back—we’ve missed her.”

Sue Vicory, an award-winning filmmaker from Johnson County who recently moved to Del Mar, Calif., produced “Kansas City Jazz and Blues: Past, Present and Future,” an acclaimed documentary chronicling jazz’s lively history in the City of Fountains. Vicory filmed Evans performing at Unity Temple on the Plaza and Jardine’s and included her in the footage.

“She is a brilliant, vivacious, charming and beautiful performer,” says Vicory.

Evans has played dates around town since she returned—at West-Chase Grille in Leawood, a popular restaurant whose chef/owner John Westerhaus has added live music to the mix; at EBT at State Line and I-435; the summer Sundays in the Park jazz series in Ironwoods; and at private country clubs. Evans will be a regular at the President Hotel’s historic Drum Room beginning in October and is recording a holiday CD, her third disc, with KC guitarist, teacher, and producer Tom Pender (whose brother, Mark, is Conan O’Brien’s trumpet player).

Her remarkably full schedule following an absence from the local scene, except for occasional private events, isn’t lost on Evans.

“I truly try to be the best I can be,” she says, “and I wake up every day with an attitude of gratitude.”

Welcome home, Candace. ❖

Star Struck

Candace Evans is a self-described shy girl, something that magically vanishes when she’s onstage. But when Evans comes nose-to-nose with actors and international artists, she’s tongue-tied.

“Actor Larry David was celebrating his sister’s birthday one night at The Lodge of the Four Seasons, and he was sitting at a large table full of people,” says Evans. “He came up to the piano and complimented me. I smiled and nodded, not knowing what to say.”

And then there was the time that several members of Fleetwood Mac hung out at Evans’ piano while she was playing the Ritz-Carlton’s high tea.

“Lindsey Buckingham and Mick Fleetwood were having a great time, and were really being supportive of me,” recalls Evans, who says she just kept playing, one eye on the audience and the other on the rock superstars.

Once Billy Joel, following a sold-out KC arena show, dropped to one knee in front of Evans during her performance in a packed Oak Room lounge at the Ritz.

“He simply said, ‘You’re great,’” says Evans, adding how universal the credo amongst musicians is for honoring peers.

Catch Evans’ homecoming concert at Tim Whitmer’s popular series, “Spirituality and All That Jazz” from 7 – 8:30 p.m. on Wed., Oct. 5. Tickets available at the door for \$7. For more information on Evans’ appearance schedule, visit www.candaceevans.com.