

## **What's On Kiev – Interview with Kateryna Kyselyova**

*J.D. Walter is one of the top jazz singers in the United States. Originally from Philadelphia, his inimitable performance style and innovations have led to his working with Randy Brecker, Dave Liebman, Billy Hart, Bill Evans, Miles Griffith and others. He's no stranger to Ukrainian audiences, having played several times at the Za Jazz Festival in Kharkiv. Now he's coming to Kyiv as a headliner of the International Jazz Subscription series. He talked to What's On about his childhood, his music and his feelings about Ukraine.*

### **What's it like to know that you have a unique voice, a unique skill that no one else has?**

I suppose that in early childhood the only way we might know of such a fact is because of what others say. Well, certainly once a child or even a teenager is marked as someone with talent, there are certain expectations that can put pressure on you.

Dealing with this pressure is a challenge, but when you start going to schools and colleges with others of similar talent, you realise that you're not so unique, and it's a relief in some ways to know that there are so many talented people in the world, many of them perhaps even more talented than yourself.

### **You've been singing since early childhood. Who or what influenced you to start?**

My mother was a music teacher and started me and my three sisters playing instruments and singing from early childhood. That created the first competitive environment for me musically, because I saw the attention my older sister received from being a great pianist. My mother was a fine singer and pianist and taught me to sing classical music in other languages, and started me with a few instruments and music theory. Then I auditioned for the men's and boy's choir at my church, which was a professionally paid group. So I was making money from age six singing, and rehearsing about five hours a week as well as singing at many church services.

### **Did you enjoy that kind of lifestyle as a child?**

It was a great escape for me. Of course I enjoyed the attention, but more than anything it was an escape. I was a very sensitive child, and was aware of the world and what was happening... The Vietnam War was going on, and the media pictures and news confused, saddened and frightened me. Also, I was growing up in a rough neighbourhood that was a little bit violent, and my father was very strict, so singing took me away from all of those things to another world.

### **How did you come to jazz?**

After my voice changed, I was no longer the boy with the golden voice. I was playing other instruments including the drums, which led me to study jazz. I met some boys who were gifted and advanced in jazz as an early teenager, and they needed a drummer. I didn't know so much about it when I started, but I started singing when my voice started to come back and played drums at the same time in a jazz trio. This trio was considered to be composed of gifted young musicians, and we got a lot of attention being so young and playing music that wasn't from our generation. I was playing in clubs at age 14. On the other hand, it was a little bit of a rebellion against my parents to play jazz, as they wanted me to sing classical music. . . I was starting to develop a good classical voice again and soloing quite a bit and winning competitions singing classically.

### **What formed your musical tastes? What do you listen to while driving, jogging or having dinner?**

I was still a huge classical fan and loved choral music and any rock music that had a lot of voices, like Queen. But I was drawn to more modern-sounding music in my early stages of jazz appreciation, like Weather Report, late Miles Davis and some classic jazz like Bill Evans and Dave Brubeck. Now I listen to everything from good popular music to hip-hop to r'n'b to classical to world music, and a lot of times I need silence. My mind is a sponge and I'm a firm believer in the adage 'listen to good music, play good music'. It's like food: good music in, good music out. Or the opposite: if there's garbage going in, then garbage will come out. But I want to make it clear that I actively listen to music. I don't like it as a background thing. If music is playing, I'm listening intently. Everywhere you go there's music playing: restaurants, malls, doctors' offices. It drives me crazy. Capitalism uses music as a tool in a way that I find offensive and vulgar and that demeans music to where it's a mind control device.

### **One of the unique things you do is use electronic devices to get a particular sound. Do you think the voice alone is insufficient to show emotion?**

I do think the voice is enough to show emotion, just as a guitar is enough without effects, but you've hit the nail on the head when you say 'showing emotions'. For me it doesn't matter if there are effects or not, the main thing an artist must do is bring the emotions, and if that isn't done it doesn't matter whether there are effects or not.

**What do you consider the most important thing in your creative life?**

Aside from being a disciplined musician, living life has to be central for an artist. Reading poetry, books, viewing great art, movies, loving, experiencing what this amazing world has to offer - and one of the most important things is failure. If I'm not failing at certain tasks in life then I'm not trying hard enough. If we don't have life experiences, how can we honestly convey the limitless number of emotions in this world to the audience?

**You've been to Ukraine several times. What are your impressions of it?**

There are certain cities in Ukraine that I love. I could live in Kyiv, as it reminds me of my hometown of Philadelphia. It's so beautiful (not to mention the beautiful women) with its seven hills, and the people seem politically and artistically aware. I also like Odessa very much. I've been treated very well by Ukrainians, and as long as they want me I'll return.

**In Ukraine jazz remains music for gourmets. What's the situation in your country?**

Well, 'jazz' is a bad word. It encompasses so many subgenres. I used to sing more what you've called 'gourmet' jazz, but now I'm becoming more modern and incorporating more modern elements into my music. Gourmet jazz is what I like to call museum jazz. It's nice, but it's dead. In becoming more modern I'm opening the doors for the younger generation to see what 'jazz' is, and maybe lead them to see the roots of where I'm coming from, which is classical jazz, classical music, the music I grew up with. Maybe I can give a new vantage point even to the seasoned jazz listener. Everywhere but in New York City and some other cities in the US is this true, as far as jazz being 'gourmet' music goes.

**Why do you think people need and love music?**

This answer could go on for days. There's so much pain in the world, but also great joy. People need escape and confirmation about their emotions. It's also cathartic for the performer, as the audience is like a psychologist and I'm their patient, and the opposite is true as well. It's a symbiotic relationship between artist and audience. They each need something from the other.

*Kateryna Kyselyova*