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A Jazz-Singing Legend Guides a New Generation

By PETER WATROUS

By the time Betty Carter started singing professionally, with Lionel Hampton's orchestra in 1948, she had made a decision to be different. Unlike most other singers of her generation, she didn't want to sound like Dinah Washington or Ella Fitzgerald or Sarah Vaughan.

Instead, she dedicated herself to finding her own voice. And now, 45 years later, the astringent tone she has developed and the emotionally intense tempos she favors have made her jazz's most imposing singer. She is at ease with being different: it seems almost a necessity to her, a way of marking off some esthetic and personal territory and staking a claim for greatness.

Ms. Carter is to perform this Saturday and Sunday at the Majestic Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music as part of its 651 Program; the show is called "Betty Carter: Jazz Ahead '94." Instead of running through a standard set with her trio, Ms. Carter has larger ambitions. She has invited 19 young musicians to join her in a program she hopes will initiate a yearly event to introduce audiences to emerging talent. The artists will be divided into four groups, with two groups playing in each half of the show; they will perform with and without Ms. Carter. If her crusade for individuality has moral overtones to it, so does her crusade to advance jazz, and jazz musicians. The Need for Encouragement

"The new interest in jazz in institutions is fine," she said. "There's a need to go back and remind people what we did. But there are so many fine young jazz musicians that need encouragement. I'm disappointed to say that my peers, the older musicians, aren't that interested in hiring younger players. It's time-consuming to rehearse and to teach, and it's tough to take their mistakes and understand them. When you're 18 or 19, you have a lot to learn. Which is fine. Everybody started somewhere."

Over the years, Ms. Carter's own trio has been one of jazz's most important schools for musicians. Among its graduates are the pianists John Hicks and Walter Davis; the bassists Buster Williams and Curtis Lundy, and the drummers Lewis Nash and Greg Hutchinson. She's a fearless and direct teacher, and her music, full of quick stops and starts and furious or glacial tempos, is as difficult to play as anything in jazz. She arranges her tunes tightly, and the young musicians she hires must be able to handle more than improvisation: they're faced with formal arrangements, with tempo changes and with Ms. Carter's deep sense of swing. Mistakes aren't tolerated: if a tempo flags or the rhythm section stops swinging, she will snap her fingers to the beat she wants, pulling the band together.

In organizing this program, Ms. Carter asked around for young musicians. Mr. Hutchinson suggested a

few names, and she held auditions in Boston with the help of the saxophonist and teacher Billy Pierce. She flew to the International Jazz Educators conference in Texas, where she and the trumpeter Roy Hargrove, who has become a beacon for young musicians, listened to all the groups that appeared. The word spread quickly, and soon jazz players from all over the country were sending her tapes. Some, like Marcus Printup, a trumpeter, and Adonis Rose, a drummer, had already performed in New York. For others, this will be their first appearance. 'This Is It'

Mr. Printup, a 26-year-old trumpet player from Jacksonville, Fla., is one of the older musicians on the program. Though he has performed with Marcus Roberts at the Village Vanguard, he's still an outsider to New York audiences.

"When I got off the plane, I took deep breath and said, 'This is it,' " Mr. Printup said. "It's a thrill to be associated with such great talent and it gives me the chance to work with one of the last of the active great vocalists."

When Ms. Carter began her career, many major American cities had healthy jazz scenes, with clubs and theaters that could support both national and local musicians. With the rise of television and rock-and-roll, however, most of the clubs and theaters either changed to different kinds of music or dropped it altogether.

"I was in New York in the 50's, and that was a dream time, with clubs everywhere," Ms. Carter said. "I wish we had that time again, really, so the younger musicians could learn faster. They're learning fast anyway, though. These kids aren't fooling. They're smart and sincere and I'd say that this is the most technically gifted generation of jazz musicians I've ever seen. They just need places to play, and exposure."

Even five years ago, Ms. Carter's plans could not have been realized. Cultural institutions like Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall, which have recently started jazz programs, weren't as open to jazz. "I think Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall having done what they've done helps other people try things," she said. "And the sheer pressure of so many young musicians, and all the good things they're doing, has moved people who might not ordinarily have been moved. For now, I'm excited because I'm looking ahead at what's in front of me. I want to go forward."