Mama Alto pays homage to Sarah Vaughan at the Melbourne Fringe

In their 2014 Melbourne Fringe Festival performance Mama Alto and her musical director Tiffani Walton pay tribute to Sarah Vaughan, one of the great ladies of American song. Mama Alto charmed her audience through her witty banter with Ms. Walton, open flirtation with everyone, and especially, her voice.

The cabaret performance – which ran September 25-28 at Melbourne’s intimate Butterfly Club – began with the voice. Mama Alto sang before introducing herself or the theme of the show. This enabled the chanteuse to dispel two important misconceptions that the audience might have had about the performance.

First, it is not a drag show. Mama Alto does not lip-sync, but sings with a versatile countertenor voice. She is not portraying a caricature of women. Tall, willowy, and beautiful, she came out on stage in a simple flesh-coloured slip (with no breast padding), covered with a black lace kaftan, minimum jewellery, natural make-up (with only a hint of an 8am shadow), and stockinged feet (with un-shaven legs). One side of her hair in long waves and the other side cut short, Mama Alto played on the ambiguity of gender.

Second, Mama Alto was paying homage to Sarah Vaughan. She did not seek to embody her voice, looks, or personality – a wise choice for any artist who would compare unfavourably to one whom even Ella Fitzgerald called the world’s “greatest singing talent”.

If the artist is a countertenor, there is a contradiction between performing the higher registers of the countertenor voice, which provides the wow factor, and the deep resonance of Sarah Vaughan’s singing, which, especially in the lower registers, gave her voice its characteristic smokiness.

The initial dissonance between my expectations meant that at first I found the upper registers of Mama Alto’s voice a bit shrill. I feel the same about Mariah Carey’s. But once I let go of the idea that I would be experiencing Sarah Vaughan, I could enjoy Mama Alto’s voice on its own merits.

Mama Alto is an exceptionally talented singer, who makes the question as to whether it is a woman or a man singing obsolete. It is clearly an angel.

This begs the question as to why there are so few countertenors in jazz. Countertenor voices are common in popular music. According to Concerthotels.com, Prince and Axl Rose sing higher notes than both Tina Turner and Kelly Clarkson. Steven Tyler, James Brown, and Freddy Mercury all sing/sang higher notes than Beyoncé, Dolly Parton, and Whitney Houston. Countertenor voices are also common in choral music and opera given the history of castrato performers in Europe.

The answer might be related to the history of African American women’s complete dominance of jazz vocals. As Mama Alto educated the audience, Sassy’s voice was another instrument among the musical instruments of the all male musicians with whom she worked, including Earl Hines and Billy Eckstine.

Mama Alto reminded the audience that as glamorous as the image of jazz is, it still comes from times of virulent racism against blacks, sexism against women, and the legal persecution of homosexuals and bisexuals. As a person of colour and genderqueer person in Australia, Mama Alto is open about the inspiration she has taken from African American women like Sarah Vaughan.
Mama Alto and Tiffani Walton’s carefully selected one-hour repertoire highlighted the relationship between Sarah’s song and life. They took us through Vaughan’s early jazz days (Black Coffee), her popular music hits (Tenderly), and, especially her signature torch songs (Send in the Clowns). They also took us through her artistic frustrations, broken romances, and insecurities as a person.

As an African American woman who grew up on Sarah Vaughan’s music, I appreciated the feeling of “being home” that was Mama Alto’s performance.

*Sassy: Mama Alto sings Sarah Vaughan was part of the Melbourne Fringe.*