

ENTERTAINMENT

All God's children get bebop

by Angela Wheelock

"We can weather the great unknown as long as we can play and sing together," Sheila Jordan told the sold-out audience at the Centennial Library during Jazz City.

That urge to keep bebop jazz alive has helped Jordan weather the unknown more than a few times herself. She credits Charlie Parker (Bird), one of the founders of bebop, as a major influence on her own life and says, "I learned to live my life according to the dues he paid. I don't do this stuff for money," she added, "I do this because I really support the music."

Sheila was born in 1928 in Detroit, Michigan on the same day, she pointed out, as Mickey Mouse. (This is an aside thrown in, it seems, as a grace note not as a fact of any great significance in her own life.) She left Detroit as a young child to go and live with her grandparents in a mining town in Pennsylvania. There she remembers singing — always singing — for whoever would listen.

As a teenager Sheila returned to Detroit in 1949 — just as bebop was bursting onto the jazz scene. "I heard Bird," Sheila remembers, "and that was it." From that point on she was hooked on jazz.

But being a jazz fan was no easy thing for a white girl in the racist atmosphere of pre-Civil Rights Detroit. Sheila began hanging out at black jazz clubs such as The Bluebird Inn and The Club Sudan. The black jazz fans were not the problem, she is quick to point out. "They welcomed you with open arms," she says. The white police were another story. They arrested Sheila and other friends on any excuse — loitering, anything. But it was clear to Sheila they simply couldn't tolerate black and white people socializing openly.

To escape that repressive atmosphere, and to learn more jazz, Sheila moved to New York City in 1951. She hung around at jazz clubs, met Charlie Mingus who encouraged her singing, and Duke Jordan, Bird's piano player, who she married.

"I loved Charlie Parker so much," Sheila joked during her Jazz City performance, "that I married his piano player just to get close to him." Backstage she confesses that it was not quite like that but — however it happened — Sheila soon found herself at the centre of the jazz world. She sat in with legendary jazz musicians and met Billy Holiday, who Sheila describes as "really real."

It was not until she and Duke separated however that Sheila began performing on her own. It was not easy to become established. "I have a lot of strikes against me," Sheila says, "I don't have a booming voice for one thing, and I'm an original — it might take me forever to gain acceptance."

Sheila admires other jazz singers, such as Betty Carter and Sarah Vaughn, but says, "I would never take ideas from them. I have

enough to sing about my own life."

Sheila's contribution to jazz may be remembered as pioneering the concept of bass and vocalist. She met her current bassist, Harvey Swartz, in 1972 and they have worked together periodically ever since.

Harvey came to jazz against the odds too. He grew up in Marblehead, Massachusetts, where "jazz was an unknown world." He remembers playing the piano almost as soon as he could walk. "I would pound out my frustrations on the piano," he says. One of the major influences on his choice of jazz was his high school music director, Sam Harris, who told him, "I hate jazz! I only like music written for concert band." Harvey was no more inclined to accept that sentence on jazz than Sheila was to let a white policeman dictate her choice of music and friends. Harvey soon gravitated to New York as well, where he and Sheila met, and their music meshed.

"Bass gives you freedom," Sheila says, "it's my favorite instrument. It is emotionally intense because you are totally undressed, neither person can hide behind the other."

This intensity was clear in the performance that Sheila and Harvey gave during Jazz City. Their renditions of "You Are My Sunshine" and "Lazy Afternoon" fixed me in my seat, afraid to breathe, afraid to miss a note.

"Pure jazz will always suffer," Sheila says, "it is up to the people who believe in it to carry it on." When asked if jazz isn't too intellectual Sheila objected vehemently. "It is the furthest thing from intellectual," she says, "it is from the heart. You have to feel it."

Sheila thinks that jazz may seem intellectual because younger musicians are getting away from the passion of the earlier players. "They should have a class that teaches them how to feel," Sheila says. Sheila, in fact, teaches a vocal class in jazz at City College in New York, and she presses her students to "unveil their deepest emotions."

It is common knowledge by now that Sheila supports herself by working at a 9-5 job, taking time off to do jazz engagements as they arise. But she sees this as more of a blessing than an impediment. Of course she would love to be able to support herself through music, which by the way, seems altogether possible given audience and critic response to her current work. But having another job allows her to sing only what she wants and what she loves.

"I don't have to prove anything," Sheila says, "I can sing any way I want to sing," which is exactly what she did for an enraptured audience of several hundred lucky jazz fans at the Centennial Library during Jazz City. Sheila and Harvey's repertoire ranged from classic bebop and scat singing, to jazz versions of pop classics such as Honeysuckle Rose, and the audience loved it all. "How far is the journey from here to a star?" Sheila sang, and the audience was hers.



SCOTT
BAIO is
CHARLES
IN CHARGE

Plot and dialogue instead of canned ham

Sitcoms beefing up

Reviews by David Maynard

If two new shows acquired by CBC Edmonton this fall are any indication, situation comedies are taking a step in the right direction by beefing up the "situation" and toning down the slapstick. Unlike their predecessors in the genre, like *Three's Company*, *Diff'n't Strokes*, *Benson*, etc., *Kate and Allie* and *Charles in Charge* rely more on substantial plot and dialogue than on ham acting and canned laughter.

Both new shows are still hampered by the limitations of the genre, the most severe of which is limiting a show's appeal to a narrow, target audience. The producers of *Kate and Allie* have singled out 25-35 year-old single women as their audience, and *Charles in Charge* is aimed at 12-16 year-old girls.

Kate and Allie is about two divorced women who share a New York apartment. In the pilot episode, Kate (Susan St. James) helps Allie (Jane Curtin) prepare for Allie's first date since her divorce. The scenes are centered almost exclusively around two women talking: in the laundry room, in a department store changing room, in the bedroom, kitchen, and living room of their apartment. While the conversations are light and entertaining, they do manage to portray some real feeling. Conversations about women's mid-life crises may not appeal to everybody, but it is particularly encouraging to see a comedy that relies more on dialogue and good writing than on cheap sight gags.

Jane Curtin reverts once or twice to her *Saturday Night Live* persona, with lines like "the man I once loved is no more than pond scum to me now", but overall, she has dropped her facade of irreverence and instead seems to be infusing some genuine feelings into her acting. The result is impressive: this sitcom just might turn out to be a proving ground from which Jane Curtin emerges as a credible actress.

Charles in Charge will appeal to even fewer readers of this article, but that is not to say that the show is devoid of talent. The situation is simple: Charles (Scott Baio) is coming to grips with the responsibilities of

adulthood. A university student away from home for the first time, he is caught between two worlds when he is hired by a young couple to look after their teenage daughter and two pre-teen sons.

The comedy of *Charles in Charge* is more in the traditional sitcom vein of sight gags and sexual innuendo. When Douglas (one of the sons) appears in a martian mask, for example, the acting and dialogue stop for a good five seconds while the laugh track is cranked up to 10. When Charles' well-cleaved date, while leaning over the chop suey, says "come and get it while it's hot," we only need about a "three" on the laugh meter to clue us in to the double-entendre.

The situation, though — at least in this pilot episode — is ingeniously orchestrated. There are three couples: while the married adults are out, Charles entertains Gwendolyn ("hotness personified!" according to Charles' friend, Buddy) downstairs, and Lilah, the teenage daughter is supposedly getting some help with her homework upstairs from Charles Alexander — "the most excellent boy in the eighth grade." Between worrying about his responsibility to protect Lilah's innocence upstairs, and trying to put the moves on Gwendolyn downstairs, by the time the adults return home, Charles has discovered that there is more to boy-girl relationships than just sex.

The moral is simplistic, but then the same could be said of any Shakespeare comedy. The trick is in how the show arrives at its conclusion, and with the geometric opposition of the two sub-plots, *Charles in Charge* provides an intricate and well thought-out build up to the inevitable conclusion.

You may not think that martian masks and phrases like "goon machine" are funny, but *Charles in Charge* was not meant to appeal to everybody. Taken for what it is, *Charles* does reflect some real talent, at least in writing, if not in directing and acting.

Kate and Allie will be showing on Monday nights at 9:00, and *Charles in Charge* is scheduled for 7:30 Wednesday. Both are on CBC Edmonton.



Photo Angela Wheelock