

Laine evokes range of emotions

Cleo Laine
Jubilee Auditorium

Concert Review by Sally-Ann Mowat

Eight years ago, I wrote a letter to my father recommending my newest musical "discovery". His reply was a detailed account of her career in the preceding twenty-year period. I stood corrected, but my enthusiasm remained unabashed. Last Wednesday night, I had the pleasure of experiencing, first-hand, the entertainment phenomenon that is Cleo Laine.

This international superstar has absolutely no formal training. She's English; she's black; and her most important asset is her husband, Johnny Dankworth.

Dankworth is an accomplished saxophonist who plays all the other reed instruments as well. The Big Band Era was fading by the time he achieved

prominence, but he has gone on to shine as one of the few classically-trained musicians in the bop-jazz world. Dankworth is an acknowledged talent in his own right - but his brilliance has been the harnessing, even the subordination, of his own ability to that of his wife.

The fact that Laine's star did not truly rise until her discovery by and alliance to Johnny Dankworth may lead the uninitiated to think her product is all form and no substance. They couldn't be more wrong. My rudimentary knowledge of her story ensured that I went to see a duo. Once the concert began, I was caught by the timelessness, the transcendent quality, of Cleo Laine herself.

Unadulterated praise sometimes admits a lack of objectivity. There were some disappointments. Long-time fans without doubt missed a "scat" number. The second half opened with three mediocre songs,

none of which provided for a demonstration of the vocal range and versatility which are Laine's strengths.

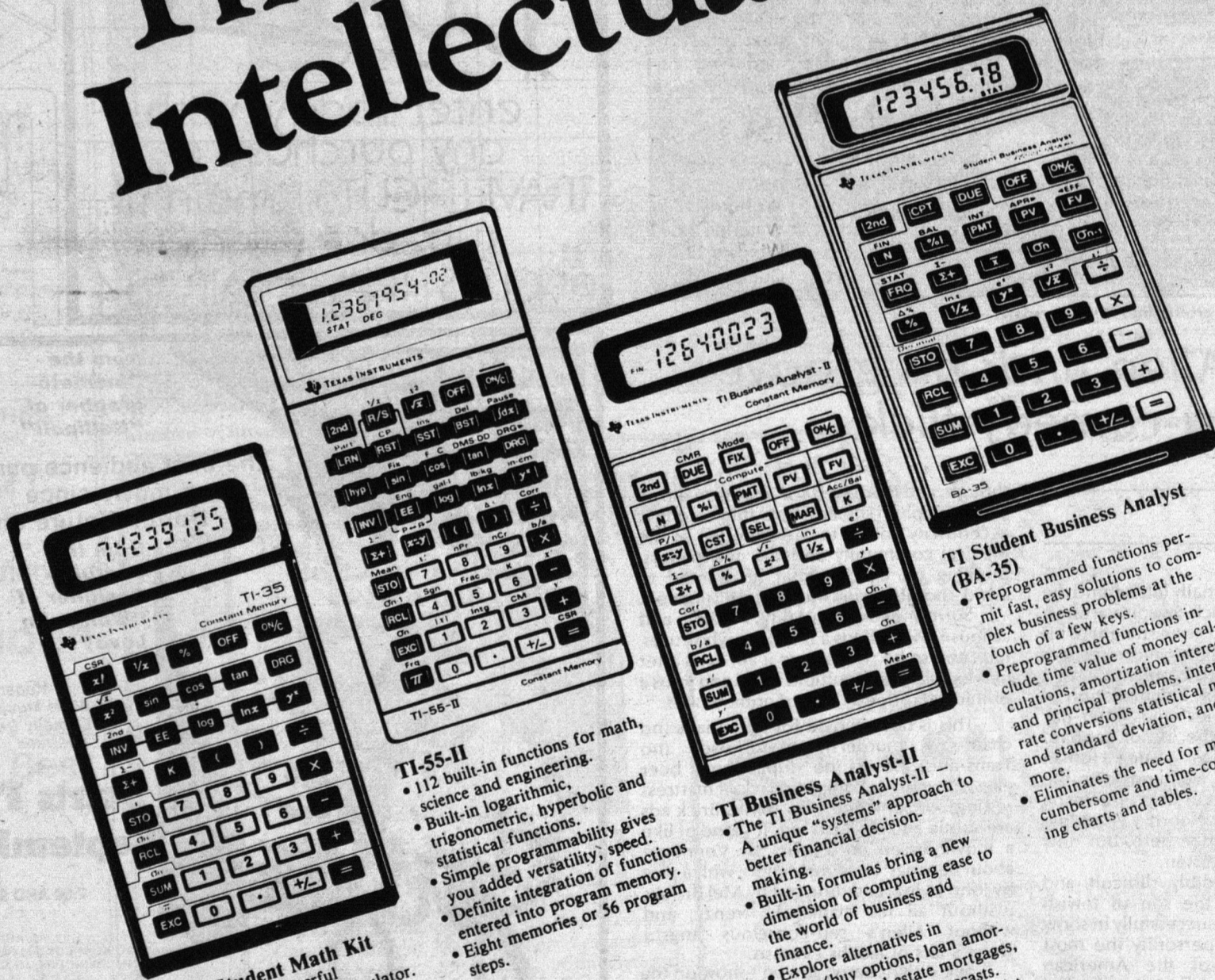
Despite the considerable skill of saxophonist-flautist Ray Buckley, the band wasn't up to snuff; pianist Barry Dunlap would obviously have preferred to be playing classically, and the percussion of Jim Zimmerman was notable mainly for its predictability and volume. (John Ward, the bass guitarist, has left no impression on me at all.) Throughout the performance, I wished the technicians would have adjusted the amps in favour of the vocalist.

Despite these flaws, both Laine's performance and her audience's response were fantastic. Her appeal crosses generational boundaries; her style does not allow for easy categorization. (Cleo Laine has the rare distinction of having been nominated for awards in the fields of pop, jazz, and classical music, in the same year.)

Wednesday's repertoire ran the gamut, as Laine moved easily from ballads to blues, musical comedy, contemporary jazz, classical numbers, and Dankworth's own arrangements of poems by Shaugnessy, Shakespeare, and Auden. This woman's technical skill is surpassed only by her ability to convey emotional shades. There is a quality to her voice which defies description; it is husky, pure, powerful, and gentle, both by turn and at the same time.

The icing on this particular cake was the intensely personal ambience created by the Laine-Dankworth combination, an element which could not possibly be reproduced on any album. They gave Edmonton an outstanding performance. We gave them a standing ovation, and for once it was spontaneous, uninhibited, and sincere. All that's left to say is, see this act next time.

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