

## **Opie Bellas**

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#### **Bellas Deserves the Buzz**

The first time I heard Opie Bellas sing, I demanded to know where she had been all my life. Not to boast, but I'm a fair connoisseur of jazz-pop vocalists and cabaret performers. I can tell who has zee dynamite and who does not. With a sophisticated, honey-warm jazz sound like Bellas— and phrasing that would have made Ella nod in admiration — why had I never heard of this woman? The answer is because I had never visited one of the radiology departments of California Pacific Medical Center, where Bellas had been hiding her light under a bushel for eight years. Lucky for me, those days are over. Bellas has picked up a singing career she basically abandoned a decade ago, when she moved from Pennsylvania to San Francisco. Lucky for all Bay Area lovers of the great American song, she is showcasing her impressive talents next Sunday, Jan. 27, in a two-show benefit for Zen Hospice at the Plush Room.

I am telling you about this now so that—in 1 year or so—you will be able to, tell your friends that you saw Opie Bellas before she became a household name or nabbed a Grammy nomination or both.

"When I was a kid, even before I was in school, I'd sit at home listening to Tony Bennett records," said Bellas by phone from a gig at some posh resort-spa in the Swiss Alps. "I just grew up loving those lush arrangements by guys like Don Costa and Johnny Mandel. Carmen McRae is probably the major influence in my life, though I don't sound anything like her." Bellas doesn't sound a lot like anybody, but there here are glints of very early Streisand and maybe Maureen McGovern in her voice, and Shirley Horn and Diana Krall in her delivery. But comparisons, as they say, are odious. Not to mention totally un-hip.

Her taste in composers is broad and rich, from Ellington and Rodgers and Hart to Mandel, Carlos Jobim, Michel Legrand and Stephen Sondheim. "And I love the writers. Johnny Mercer, Sondheim and Marilyn and Alan Bergman," she said. "I'm hung up on

the lyricists."

That Bellas should be coming out—or back—a benefit for hospice is the work of two women who, like me, heard her and began to imagine rooms and clubs in which they needed to hear her sing. Discoverer No. 1 was San Francisco Realtor Laura Taylor, who was knocked out when she saw Bellas perform at a mutual friend's 50th birthday party. That friend, frame shop owner Lynn Cichetti, just happened to have a jazz musician father named Chick, who'd flown out from Waterbury, Conn., for his daughter's big five-0. Chick and Bellas just clicked, personally and professionally," and decided to perform an hourlong set for Lynn. Everyone in the joint said the same thing: "You gotta cut a CD."

So, Chick, Ople and bassist Tom Martin cut "How Do You Keep the Music Playing." (it's at Tower Records on Bay Street in San Francisco, Amoeba, Rasputin's and the Emeryville Borders in the East Bay.) About six months after Chick went back to the East Coast, the cancer he'd been battling got the upper hand. His last days were spent in the tender care of his kids and Waterbury hospice workers.

By then, Laura Taylor was on a mission. She played the CD for everybody she knew, including longtime pals, Mike and Francine Filice. Francine, who owns a group-travel booking business, said, "We have to find a way to get this girl on a stage." When a close friend of Taylor's began to need San Francisco Zen Hospice, the idea of a benefit was born. Bellas will be joined at the Plush Room by Steve Situm, fine crooner in his own right who nevertheless decided awhile back that life upon the wicked stage would have to play second fiddle to his wife, three kids and well-paying job in the wine business. For show times and other information, call (415) 885-2800. A year from now, 'If you're left out of all the Opie Bellas buzz, you'll have only yourself to blame.

**Stephanie Salter**  
**SF Chronicle**  
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