

Deep in the songbook

ERIN McKEOWN ENJOYS SAMPLING LESSER KNOWN TUNES

By Andrew Gilbert
for the Mercury News
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Among the rising generation of singer-songwriters, 30-year-old guitarist Erin McKeown stands out as one of the most stylistically eclectic, an artist who blissfully rummages through America's musical closet borrowing from jazz, folk, rock, blues and Tin Pan Alley.

Raised in Fredericksburg, Va., she released her first album, 1998's "Monday Morning Cold," while still an undergraduate at Brown University, where she earned a degree in ethnomusicology. Her subsequent CDs, such as 2005's exquisite "We Will Become Like Birds" (Nettwerk), display a capacious musical imagination, incisive, almost aphoristic lyrics and a real ear for melodic hooks.

Last summer she released her first official live album, the deeply satisfying "Lafayette" (Signature Sounds), featuring her original tunes and well-chosen covers from her other 2007 release, "Sing You Sinners" (Nettwerk), which offers a canny tour through the back pages of the American Songbook, from a slow and sassy version of Fats Waller's "If You're a Viper" to a hard-swinging rendition of the Anita O'Day vehicle "Thanks for the Boogie Ride."

McKeown performs Friday at Montalvo Arts Center with powerhouse drummer Allison Miller on a double bill with San Francisco singer-songwriter Sean Hayes. McKeown also performs Sunday at Cafe du Nord in San Francisco. She answered questions from her home in Northampton, Mass.

Q You made your reputation as a singer-songwriter, but you've also found a lot of great material by other artists. Where did you discover "Thanks for the Boogie Ride"?

A I found out about Anita O'Day because my grandfather is a big-band aficionado. Long before I did this project, when it seemed totally inappropriate, he was finding me old songs because he'd love to hear his granddaughter sing them. He gave me a CD of O'Day's greatest hits, and that opened up this huge catalog of stuff. I would have loved to have seen her. As a singer, she takes a lot more chances than Ella Fitzgerald. I'm not slamming Ella at all. She's by no means vanilla. But somehow O'Day seems a little more wild to me, a little more unbound, and that's the spirit I wanted to bring to these songs.

Q I can see the affinity. Ella has this spectacular instrument that you just glory in, while O'Day had a small range, and so she had to make all these interesting choices about what to do with it.

A Yeah, I've never been a virtuosic vocalist. I certainly think I have an interesting voice, and it does all the things I want it to do. But I'm not Ella, and if I'm going to tackle these songs, what can I bring to them? I worked on assembling a really interesting musical context, with three other great players who have their own ideas, and finding more obscure songs so my interpretation wouldn't have to be measured against anything else.

Q There's one ringer on the album, your tune "Melody," which blends right into the program and sounds like a 1930s rhythm number. Did you write it to sort of slip it in among these old songs?

A Actually, I wrote it about four years ago as a stand-alone thing, a throwaway. I was being a little self-deprecating, thinking, "What is it that my songs need more of? They need more melody." So I decided to write a song about a girl. . . . I think I imagined that it would be for a project where I had written 12 songs that were standard-like. But I think, as the only original, it served this record so much better than it would an album of originals. I thought it would be a little clever surprise.

Q After Dylan and Lennon and McCartney, there was this idea that the most authentic artists were singer-songwriters performing their own material. You don't seem unduly burdened by that notion of authenticity.

A This classic idea of a singer-songwriter, exemplified by Dylan - that's never held much water for me. I like that music; it's certainly part of the culture I grew up in. But Dylan's songs don't reach me the way these older songs do. I think singers today . . . do standards record looking for some kind of legitimacy, because these songs are so much older and are "classic" with a capital C. I've never felt that pressure, and maybe in the end that's the legacy of Bob Dylan, because I've always felt I could stand on my own as a writer. Why would I choose to do someone else's songs? The answer ends up being simply because I love the music.

Where: Carriage House Theatre, Montalvo Arts Center, 15400 Montalvo Road, Saratoga

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Tickets: \$25

Details: (408) 961-5858 or www.ticketmaster.com