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Sloane: A Jazz Singer

Songbook devotee Sloane was acclaimed at Newport in 1961 but then faced the onset of 60s pop, which she defied with typical tenacity

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There are moments in this documentary film that are happy, some that are sad, others are uplifting, a few tinged with a depressing awareness of the struggles through which so many – too many – jazz artists must struggle, but overall there is an air of joy as the story of Carol Sloane is told.

In this always engaging tale, a camera crew follows the singer during the three weeks leading up to her 2019 appearance at Birdland, an engagement to be recorded as her final live album. At the time, Sloane was in her early 80s, not too steady on her feet, but clearly a woman of indomitable inner strength and courage. She was outspoken, too, a characteristic that is heard often as her long and distinguished career is traced through interviews from today and yesterday and film clips, many of them snippets of long-ago performances.

As good as Sloane was – and she really was very good indeed – her career was most often spent in the shadows. From early childhood, she wanted to sing and was inspired by and initially sought to emulate four singers she most admired: Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Carmen McRae, Billie Holiday.

At the 1961 Newport Jazz Festival, Sloane was one of the “New Faces” and, as she observes, when the pianist didn’t know the verse of a song she wanted to sing, she told him “Just play an arpeggio in B flat and I’ll sing the verse a cappella.” And that is what she did, and this proved to be a turning point in her career. Seeing and hearing this onscreen confirms it was indeed a magical moment. The outdoor audience is all but gone, but she sings the song as if the world is listening. Fortunately, among those few who had stayed to hear this as yet unknown singer were some leading music critics, and word quickly spread.

Unfortunately, this moment in time was only two years before a massive shift in the world of popular music. Interestingly, at first Sloane did not suffer as harshly as some. Indeed, she toured, sometimes as an opening act, with The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, but jazz was edged steadily further from centre stage.

[Sloane: A Jazz Singer \(Trailer 2023\)](#) from [Michael Lippert](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Continuing to sing only jazz, and jazz-inflected classic songs from the Great American Songbook, Sloane had at times to seek work outside music, but she never altered her musical approach, never changed her style to suit the popular trend, never wavered in her ambition to be a jazz singer like her idols. Indeed, she was often linked to them by critics who, when speaking of these legends, would mention Ella and Sarah and Carmen and Billie before adding “And then, there’s Carol Sloane.” This comment is repeated here by some, including, wryly, Sloane herself.

In addition to the clips of performances through the years, director Michael Lippert has onscreen remarks from some of those who knew Sloane well, friends, many of them musicians, and all admirers of her talent and tenacity. Among these are pianist Mike Renzi, singers Daryl Sherman and Catherine Russell, former club-owner Stephen Barefoot (executive producer of this film), writer Dan Morgenstern and John Brown (vice-provost at Duke University).

It is, though, Sloane herself who captures and holds the attention as she defies the onset of ageing, demonstrating that while her body might be reaching its limits, her singing voice remains superb. This is demonstrated vividly during the last 10 or so minutes of this 90-minute film as we hear excerpts from three of the songs she sang on that September 2019 night at Birdland.

A month later, with Mike Renzi, she performed a show, Two For The Road, at North Carolina’s Clayton Center, but then came the pandemic and in June the following year she suffered a stroke and retired to a care home for the last 18 months of her life.

As suggested, many emotions are stirred by this excellent recounting of the life and career of an outstanding jazz singer, the most dominant and lasting of which is the air of joyousness Carol Sloane created throughout her life.

Sloane: A Jazz Singer, a film directed by Michael Lippert. sloanefilm.com