

Film Overview: SLOANE • A JAZZ SINGER

Commentary by Director/Editor Michael Lippert

“Sloane: A Jazz Singer” chronicles the life and career of little-known jazz legend Carol Sloane, who, despite having toured and performed with some of the greatest names in 20th century American music, is still chasing artistic perfection at the ripe age of 82. Hers is a heart-wrenching, hopeful, and ultimately beautiful story of faithful adherence to one’s craft, in the face of myriad trials and tragedy that come her way.

But it is also an homage to a uniquely American art form, and Carol’s unwillingness to see it die. Captured just prior to the 2020 pandemic, the film’s reminder of the social and cultural importance of live jazz, its venues, and the preservation of its history, proves especially timely.

The film opens on an unvarnished view of our lady living alone in a modest one-bedroom apartment outside Boston. With a slow gait and incessant back pain, she seems a far cry from the singing star we might expect. But we quickly learn that, after several years away from the scene due to her late husband’s illness, Ms. Sloane’s genius is perfectly preserved, and her knowledge of jazz and its history unmatched. Most importantly, this cussing, whip-smart, self-described diva is now preparing for a career-capping performance in which she will record one more live album - her main bucket-list item - at New York City’s famed Birdland, in just one week.

As Carol looks ahead to her show, the film weaves a historical retrospective around the milestones of her six-decade career. Rare archival visuals and recordings are paired with personal, cinéma vérité moments with Ms. Sloane and the film crew that follows her. Through these intimate, truthful moments we are granted the unique vantage point of an artist who still remembers an America when jazz was its cultural jewel.

We see old photo albums of Carol as a young girl, while she recounts “the great quartet” of Black female singers Carmen McRae, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, and Billie Holiday, who inspire and inform her at a young age. As a child raised in the rigid structure of the Catholic Church in Providence, Rhode Island, she finds an escape in the improvisation she hears on late-night radio by the great Black singers and innovators of jazz. At 14, she becomes a devoted student to their music, not knowing she will one day befriend some of them.

By 1961, she is signed by Columbia Records after stunning critics with an *a capella* performance at The Newport Jazz Festival. From there, she is invited to sing with the likes of Oscar Peterson and Ella Fitzgerald, and appears several times on The Tonight Show. She is praised by late night luminaries Johnny Carson, Steve Allen, and Arthur

Godfrey, among others. The New York Times will call her “Fitzgerald’s rightful heir” and the Washington Post will one day claim, “If Carol Sloane isn’t America’s greatest jazz singer, no one deserves the title.” She even rides with The Beatles and The Stones on their first American tour, and finds herself hanging out with Mick Jagger and Keith Richards.

But as The British Invasion sweeps the country, Carol sees her own music and relevance fading. This spawns years of financial and personal turmoil, leading to a desperate suicide attempt. But her artistic passion never dwindles, and in her own words, the music of The Great American Songbook keeps her alive. Ultimately, she must confront what success means to her in a world more concerned with fame and fortune than artistic excellence. And she will go on to co-run a first-rate jazz club in North Carolina, record more than 30 albums, win adoring fans around the world, and teach seminars to future singers at universities, all despite never earning a single dime on royalties.

While Carol recounts the highs and lows of her rich but turbulent career, she must contend with the film crew following her day-in and day-out, while the pain of old age, crippling self-doubt, and pre-show anxiety only heighten by the minute. But as showtime approaches, she perseveres, as she always has, “all for that moment, when the light is on you.” And she is a soul who has learned to relish the moments life gives her, cheer wildly for The New England Patriots while sipping champagne, and talk shop over Asian buffets with the young film crew encircling her.

Enlightening personal commentaries are shared by industry notables including multi-Grammy winning editor/writer Dan Morgenstern, Grammy-winning singer Catherine Russell, Emmy-winning composer and musician Mike Renzi, Grammy-winning pianist Bill Charlap, Duke University Vice-Provost for the Arts John Brown, Emmy-winning recording engineer Joel Moss, and others.

Key scenes include: Ms. Sloane’s listening to her original 1961 recording by Columbia Records, during which she is transported to her youthful self; Ms. Sloane’s meeting and ultimately befriending her heroes Ella Fitzgerald, Carmen McCrae and Oscar Peterson, during which we learn of the major cultural impacts of each luminary; Ms. Sloane’s failed suicide attempt while endeavoring to escape an abusive relationship, and subsequent artistic rebirth; putting her career on hold for her husband’s fight with Alzheimers’; and finally, Ms. Sloane’s triumphant return to the stage at Birdland.

“Sloane: A Jazz Singer,” the story of the imperfect perfectionist, unfolds as both a meditation on the life of an artist, and an intimate tribute to the music whose history she has felt compelled to preserve.