

In a documentary of her life, singer Carol Sloane receives her overdue applause

By Bill Beuttler Globe correspondent, September 14, 2023



Carol Sloane at the Newport Jazz Festival, as seen in the film "Sloane: A Jazz Singer."
Courtesy of Sloane: A Jazz Singer

The documentary “Sloane: A Jazz Singer” opens with Carol Sloane, breathing heavily and wearing big-lensed sunglasses and a light blue baseball cap that reads “goingbarefoot.inc,” walking slowly into the Woburn Market Basket near her home in Stoneham.

She pivots and laughs at herself when she notices she had approached the exit door by mistake, and is then shown explaining to the store’s manager, Glenn Connors, that a film crew was with her documenting her life and career. She had come hoping to retrieve a cane she had left in a shopping cart, and the film’s director, Michael Lippert, had decided something good might come of tagging along.

Sloane quickly identifies her missing cane from the assortment of them that Connors brings out.

Problem solved. As he returns the other lost canes for storage, Connors tentatively asks, “Are you famous and I just don’t know it?”

“Well, if you like jazz, you might know who I am,” she tells him. “But if you don’t like jazz, you might not know who the hell I am.”

“I like jazz,” he replies. “What instrument did you play?”

“I sing,” she answers, using the present tense.

“Oh, you’re a singer,” Connors enthuses. “Fantastic.”

The scene was shot on Sept. 7, 2019, and in less than two weeks Sloane would be in New York opening a two-night weekend run at Birdland, performances that gave the film its narrative endpoint and would yield a live album, “Carol Sloane: Live at Birdland.”

Lippert’s hunch had proved correct. The Market Basket scene encapsulated the unjust obscurity that Sloane, [who died in January at age 85](#), had faded into and that the filmmakers hope to rectify. “It couldn’t have been scripted better, right?” he acknowledges by phone from North Carolina.

Stephen Barefoot, whose production company’s gimme hat Sloane was wearing, had maintained a 50-year friendship with Sloane dating back to their time together at two jazz clubs in North Carolina. It was Barefoot who set the film in motion.

“At one point, I was with her and she just looked at me and she said, ‘Stephen, do you think there is a soul who will even remember who I am after I’m gone?,’” he explains. “And that’s where this documentary came from. It’s our attempt to try to answer that question in the affirmative.”



Carol Sloane shown onstage at Birdland in 2019 in "Sloane: A Jazz Singer." Courtesy of Sloane: A Jazz Singer

The film has already received accolades from various film festivals, and now it's coming to the Boston area for two more screenings, the first Sunday at the [Newburyport Documentary Film Festival](#). (The movie can only be shown at festivals, but [a campaign is underway](#) to secure music rights for wider distribution.)

“Sloane: A Jazz Singer” covers the considerable peaks and valleys of her remarkable career with a mix of archival material and footage shot in the days leading up to her Birdland shows. An array of sources speak of her on camera, among them vocalist Catherine Russell, who says “Carol Sloane is right in there with everyone you need to hear,” pianist Bill Charlap, and jazz journalist and historian Dan Morgenstern.

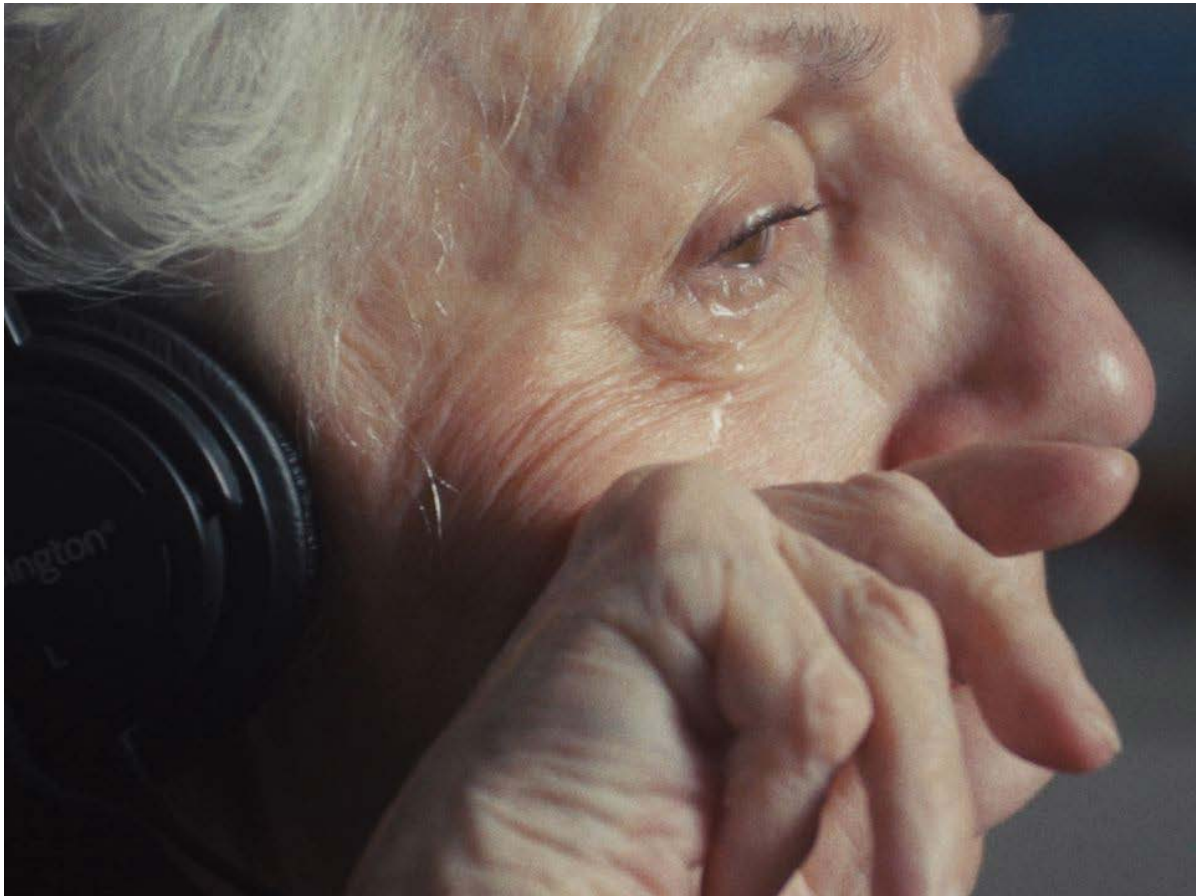
Morgenstern witnessed a breakthrough moment for the singer at the 1961 Newport Jazz Festival. By this time, Sloane, a Providence native, had spent time touring with a big band and been tapped by Jon Hendricks to substitute for Annie Ross in the vocalese super trio Lambert, Hendricks & Ross whenever Ross was unavailable. Hendricks also helped secure Sloane a slot for young, lesser-known talents at that year's Newport festival, and she made the most of it.

“I said to the piano player, I want to sing ‘Little Girl Blue,’” she recalls in the film. The pianist knew the tune but not the verse, and Sloane wanted to sing the verse. “I said, ‘Well, it's OK. Just play an arpeggio in B-flat and I'll sing the verse a cappella.’ People didn't do that. You didn't sing a verse a cappella and be expected to be in tune when it got to the chorus.”

But this 24-year-old singer managed it, and then some.

“She opened her mouth,” recalls Morgenstern, “and the moment she did we were all transfixed.”

Soon Sloane was recording her debut album for Columbia Records, “Out of the Blue.” (One of the film's most poignant moments shows her listening to her recorded version of “Little Girl Blue” on the album.) That led to regular appearances on “The Tonight Show” with Johnny Carson. It also led to her touring with both the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, when her friend [Bob Bonis](#) was asked to oversee early US tours of theirs. She liked both bands, but sensed their rise spelled trouble for her career.



Carol Sloane wipes a tear as she listens to her own recording of "Little Girl Blue," as seen in the film "Sloane: A Jazz Singer." Courtesy of Sloane: A Jazz Singer

As Barefoot quotes her in the film: “She said, ‘Those were the guys who were going to change the world. I wasn’t.’”

Rock’s ascending dominance made life difficult for jazz singers. Sloane was struggling to make ends meet when she was offered semi-regular work at a club in Raleigh, N.C., the Frog and Nightgown, which she supplemented by working as a legal secretary.

Sloane met Barefoot at the Frog when he was hired to tend bar there after her own arrival. But she also met pianist Jimmy Rowles, with whom she returned to New York. When his drinking turned that relationship toxic for her, she attempted suicide, then left him. She was on the verge of starting a legal job in Boston when Barefoot asked her to return to North Carolina to help him run the club he was opening called Stephen’s, After All. She spent a happy period singing and booking the likes of Carmen McRae and Shirley Horn at Stephen’s, which in the film she insists ranked with Carnegie Hall as the two best venues she had ever performed in.



The cover of Carol Sloane's 1962 Columbia album "Out of the Blue." Courtesy of Sloane: A Jazz Singer

But the club eventually folded, and Sloane found herself broke and depressed. Desperate, she began phoning around seeking work and was offered a gig at a Commonwealth Avenue club called the Starlight Roof by its booker, Buck Spurr. The two wound up marrying in that club atop the Howard Johnson's hotel, Sloane watching the Citgo sign flashing out the window as she spoke her vows.

The couple settled in Stoneham. Sloane's career rekindled, she began recording albums for Concord Records and became popular in Japan. But when Spurr suffered a succession of health disasters, she set her career aside to care for him.

When Spurr died in 2014, Sloane decided to resume singing. "Bill Charlap told me that if I didn't go back to singing, I was committing a sin. Neglecting my gift," she says in the film, speaking to an audience at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Conn., in 2018. "And he was absolutely right. You're neglecting your gift. That's the greatest sin."

Which led to the all-important Birdland performances that the documentary builds toward.

"What made me feel that we had a story to tell that was going to be compelling was not only did we have this great, rich history to look back on ... but she had this present-day show to look forward to, which to her was a bucket-list item that was going to be like a legacy performance for her," Lippert, the film's director, says.

What was Sloane hoping for at Birdland? In the documentary, she looks into the camera and tells us:

“It sounds silly, but what I want to hear is, ‘Miss Sloane, the house is SRO.’ And then when I finish my set, I want vigorous applause. An ovation. Standing ovation that I deserve — not because it’s the fashion to do it, but because I really did earn it. That’s what I want.”

Did she get it? You can probably guess by listening to the last track of the live album. But to see if the audience is standing, try to catch a showing of this excellent documentary.

“SLOANE: A JAZZ SINGER”

Newburyport Documentary Film Festival, Sept. 17, 6 p.m. Firehouse Center for the Arts, 1 Market Square, Newburyport. \$18-\$20.

2023nbptdocufest.eventive.org/schedule

Lonely Seal International Film, Screenplay & Music Festival. Oct. 8, 4 p.m. (Q&A to follow the screening). Regent Theatre, 7 Medford St., Arlington. \$8.50-\$14.45.

www.eventbrite.com, <https://lonelysealfestival.com>