

New Orleans Jazz Fest showcases Cindy Scott's improvisational flair, band-leading skills

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By Chris Waddington

Cindy Scott delivered just what you want from an early set on the first Friday of the New Orleans Jazz Fest. The singer displayed a vivacious manner, improvisational chops honed at clubs in Europe and New Orleans, and a closely rehearsed band: guitarist Brian Seeger, drummer Jamison Ross and Joe Ashlar on B-3 Organ. Then she added that special Jazz Fest spice, with brief guest appearances by a pair of iconic local performers: trumpeter Shamarr Allen and singer Leah Chase.



Cindy Scott Jazz singer Cindy Scott performed Friday at the 2012 New Orleans Jazz Fest

Scott's musicianship was especially apparent when she let loose with improvised scatting. Her ear for harmony and her deft rhythmic sense put her on equal footing with her band in a string of original tunes and well chosen standards, including a burning version of "Shaw 'Nuff." (Scott added her own lyrics to that classic bop line penned by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie).

At times, Scott and Seeger seemed to mimic each other, unleashing long legato phrases and pushing the tempos. Scott was blessed with a very smart drummer, too: one who reined in the volume and focused on setting up climactic moments. Because the organist carried much of the pulse with the bass pedals, Ross was free to explore the rich colors available on his kit.

Scott's showmanship came to the fore when her guests joined her on the Jazz Tent stage. With Leah Chase --- once her teacher at the University of New Orleans --- Scott traded bantering lines and a bit of trash talk while twining voices in deft counterpoint. Chase may have the more burnished instrument, but it hardly mattered in this setting. Scott closed with an original tune, "The Boy Can Play," which is set to a New Orleans parade rhythm --- a fine way to welcome Allen, who mixed bright runs with vocalized trumpet effects, and brought the crowd out of its seats for a final cheer.