

# At swim, one diva

Dianne Reeves will never forget meeting the singer whose work her own most resembles, Sarah Vaughn

by **Toni Lester**

**Dianne Reeves performs in Sanders Theater, Cambridge, Oct. 4.**

With a blinding smile and a regal stage presence, Dianne Reeves wowed the full-capacity crowd at Sanders Theater on Oct. 4 by showing us that a truly gifted singer knows no musical boundaries. For over two hours, stopped only by a short intermission, she took us on a musical journey that included jazz standards, pop hits and African rhythms, all the while emitting an aura of style, energy and grace.

Reeves embodies the kind of class I usually associate with the jazz divas of old—Sarah Vaughn especially comes to mind: She can be soft and sultry on quiet ballads, then sexy, almost raunchy on Bessie Smith-like blues full of double entendres and stories of lost loves who did her wrong. Reeves has a special affinity for Vaughn, whom she met when she was a teenager. In her 2001 Blue Note CD homage to Vaughn, “The Calling” (Blue Note #724352769421), she tells how she met Vaughn back stage before a 1975 concert and proceeded to brag to the singer about how much she loved her without realizing whom she was

talking to. All of a sudden the stage manager called Vaughn to perform and Reeves realized her folly. “My heart sank in embarrassment,” she said, “but I came to realize that I had been granted the rare privilege to share my sincere love and admiration for Sarah.”

Reeves has a penchant for choosing a repertoire that is both unpredictable in its use of songs not usually associated with jazz, and inventively pleasing because of the way in which she reshapes them in her own musical image. For instance, on her new CD, “A Little Moonlight” (Blue Note #724358025224), her pensive, nostalgic version of the song “Lullaby of Broadway” makes you realize that the song actually is a lullaby—something we tend to miss when it’s heard in the context of a larger and louder than life Broadway show. In a similar vein, she opened up the Sanders performance with a sensual, impressionistic arrangement of the old folk tune “The Twelfth of Never,” ably assisted by her pianist Peter Martin, drummer Gregory Hutchinson and bassist Kenny Davis.

## The show stoppers

One of two show stoppers was “Your Eyes,” a song associated with pop singer Steve Winwood that, in Reeves’ dexterous hands, turned into a hip, danceable cascade of sound that showcased her incredible

vocal range and rapid trumpet-like scattling. While the recorded version, which can be heard on her 1999 CD, “Bridges,” is also impressive for its polished arrangements and the energy Reeves brings to her singing, her live version was more adventurous improvisationally and thus more satisfying.

A close second was Oscar Brown’s “Afro Blue,” complete with a masterful drum solo by Hutchinson. As Reeves salsa’d across the stage in an understated silk brown pants suit and white tank top, her head crowned by a majestic mane of dreadlocks, she called up the spirits of her ancestors, fitfully honoring their contributions to the origins of jazz and her own musical journey.

At one point near the end of the concert, Reeves sang to the audience about her many struggles and successes over the years. “There have been things I dreamed of that happened and things that I hoped would happen that did not,” she sang, “but now I know one thing is certain—that God always had a plan for me. When I turned 40, I decided it was time to stop swimming against the current, to swim in my own



**Dianne Reeves. Photo: Clay Patrick McBride**

divine flow instead.” From the smiles, cheers, howls and several standing ovations, it was clear that the audience was grateful for the chance to spend some time swimming there with her as well. ▼