



Cyrille Aimée, the Green Mill, Oct 12-13, 2012

By Neil Tesser

The first time I heard Cyrille Aimée, it took all of a half-chorus – maybe 30 seconds – before I turned to the folks I was with and said, “She’s the real thing.” I have yet to meet a musician or serious listener whose reaction has differed – which I suppose makes sense when you’re confronted with one of the top two or three jazz singers to emerge this century.



Aimée – who sings this weekend at the Green Mill – balances a choir’s worth of musicality into one package. It starts with her rhythmic authority: raised on the Romany (gypsy jazz) tradition in her native France, she swings as hard as any frenetically driven gypsy-jazz guitarist, with half the apparent effort. (That’s a big part of the “wow” factor with Aimée; she makes everything look easy.) After hearing her several times in person, and listening to her handful of albums, I’ve yet to hear her sing a note out of tune: her intonation surpasses that of

many horn players – and in jazz, that almost never happens.

Her timbre, as salty-sweet as Atlantic City taffy, proves just as malleable, allowing her to surround a ballad, massage a tricky bop tune, or simply overpower a rip-roaring cooker. And when she improvises, her solos have the impeccable phrasing and coherent focus you hope for from instrumentalists – and only good ones at that. (A dirty little secret in the jazz community: most singers really shouldn’t scat. A corollary: let Aimée do it instead.)

You don’t even have to take my word for it: the judges have spoken. She won the Montreux Jazz Festival’s international voice contest in 2007 and the Thelonious Monk Competition in 2010; she’s also one of five finalists selected for the 2012 Sarah Vaughan International Jazz Vocal Competition (which takes place next weekend) and also a finalist in at the Wangaratta (Australia) Jazz Festival Competition (next month).

Now living in New York, Aimée has become a semi-regular visitor to Chicago. She has appeared on several occasions with Jeff Lindbergh’s Chicago Jazz Orchestra – a CJO album with Aimée as guest will arrive in 2013 – and she performed as part of last year’s Gypsy Jazz Festival at the Mill. She told me this month of her own new disc, due in March, that features three guitarists representing the prevalent threads of her music – one playing on steel-string (gypsy jazz), another on nylon-string acoustic (Brazilian music), and the third on electric (mainstream jazz).

Aimée returns to the Mill this weekend, with three sets each on Friday and Saturday, backed by pianist Ron Perrillo, bassist Dennis Carroll, and drummer George Fludas on drums. And why not? Aimée deserves nothing less than Chicago’s best rhythm section; and they deserve nothing less than one of the world’s great vocalists.