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JAZZ REVIEW
MUSIC, POETRY AND NATURE TAKE WING AND SOAR

*By Don Heckman
Special to The Times*

The aviary world has always been appealing to jazz artists. Material from the bop era either written by or celebrating the life of Charlie "Bird" Parker includes "Ornithology," "Yardbird Suite" and "Birdland." Eric Dolphy once said that he was inspired by birdcalls, and "Baltimore Oriole," "Skylark," "Bye, Bye Blackbird" and others have long been staples of the jazz repertoire.

But it remained for singer Susan Krebs to link all these elements together into a fascinating Birdsong."

On Sunday afternoon at Giannelli Square in Northridge, Krebs, backed by guitarist Larry Koonse, saxophonist-flutist Rob Lockart, bassist Tim Emmons, percussionist M.B. Gordy, drummer Jerry Kalaf and pianist and musical director Rich Eames, mixed songs, video, poetry and narrative into a musical-dramatic tribute to the timeless appeal of bird song.

She narrated poems and aphorisms by Henry Thoreau, Victor Hugo and others, and sang some of the standards noted above as well as lesser-known but equally compelling numbers. She also described the characteristics of various birds as the cozy auditorium echoed with their recorded sounds.

Although most of her career has been spent as an actor, Krebs has quietly built a career as a highly credible jazz singer. Her versions of "Blackbird," "Baltimore Oriole" and "Skylark," among others, were notable for their imaginative musicality, and the soloing by every player was first-rate.

But it may have been a Chinese proverb read by Krebs that best described the essence of "Jazz Aviary": "A bird does not sing because it has an answer; it sings because it has a song." But it remained for singer Susan Krebs to link all these elements together into a fascinating musical presentation she calls "Jazz Aviary: A Celebration of Birds through Music, Poetry and Birdsong."

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THRUSH: Susan Krebs celebrates birds in "Jazz Aviary" concert

Susan Krebs can remember the precise experience that stimulated "Jazz Aviary" - her celebration of birds through music, poetry and birdsong. "It dates back to waking up at dawn in my grand-mother's house in the country," the singer-actress says. "Lying in my bedroom in that old house, listening to an unbelievable chorus of birds singing in those early morning hours - singing music, really. It's always been with me, and I think that, more than anything else, is what led me to this place."

"This place" is a program further exploring the music and nature connections Krebs first encountered in her albums "What Am I Here For?" and "Jazz Gardener." With "Jazz Aviary" - which will be performed in three concerts at Space at Fountain's 'End in Silver Lake - she brings it all into full bloom.

In the songs, Krebs and her six musicians soar through jazz-in-flight versions of material including Hoagy Carmichael and Johnny Mercer's "Skylark," Lennon-McCartney's "Blackbird" and Ralph Vaughan Williams' "A Lark Ascending." Between songs, Krebs recites poetry from Thoreau, Shelley and others, occasionally tossing in some ornithological facts ("In as nonintellectual a manner as possible," says Krebs with a laugh). The performance wraps with a segment devoted to the recorded sounds of birds themselves, the myriad songs, calls and cries that have drifted through Krebs' memory. Interestingly, the experience of "Jazz Aviary" has had similar effect upon her audiences, she says. "I've had people call me to tell me how it triggered their own childhood experiences. How, for the first time as adults, they began to hear the birds in their own backyards," Krebs says. "And that was like, 'OK, my job is done.' Because if nothing else, I want 'Jazz Aviary' to help people cut through the cacophony that is modern living and bring us back into the rhythm of nature - back to slowing down, listening and tapping into cosmic time."

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