

Entertainment / Music**Beyond all that jazz**

Amanda Tosoff debuts her CD as part of Toronto Jazz Festival's Discovery Series.



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Words, the new album from Amanda Tosoff, is having its CD release party March 10 at the Music Gallery.

By: Peter Goddard Visual Arts, Published on Thu Mar 10 2016

Barely a second or two into the song “[Daffodils](#)” by Amanda Tosoff an unexpected thing happens. You might even say it sounds like jazz.

The music, softly stroked piano chords to begin, is entirely by Tosoff, a 32-year-old Toronto pianist, composer, arranger and teacher. The flowers in question are those described by William Wordsworth in “Daffodils,” a.k.a. “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” that famous reverie rarely associated with such a rough and tumble art form as jazz. But Tosoff quickly adds a low note that’s conspicuously different and deliciously discordant. The swish and sizzle of a cymbal come next as the rhythm section kicks in.

“Daffodils” opens *Words*, Tosoff’s new album having its CD release party Thursday at the Music Gallery. The nine-song collection, the composer’s setting of poetry that resonates with her, inaugurates the TD Toronto Jazz Festival’s “[Discovery Series Special Projects](#).” Its very title warns jazz purists to expect they’re about to discover a whole lot more than jazz.

That’s precisely what’s to be expected from emerging composers like Tosoff whose career, mostly lots of “straight ahead modern jazz” early on, has evolved. *Words* speaks vigorously about that evolution and about jazz’s evolution as well.

Nowadays jazz, the funky, swinging stuff of smoky nightclub lore, is only one sound circling through a larger musical universe that also goes by the name of jazz. All that jazz has been replaced by jazz and all that’s beyond jazz.

“The material here in *Words* is about melody and the mood of each poem, which would push me in a certain direction,” Tosoff says. (Vocals on *Words* are by Felicity Williams.) “To be totally honest I was a little fearful about how this was going to be received. There is this feminine side to it. Then I

had the fear that it might be too feminine.”

Feminine it is. The spirit of the young Joni Mitchell hovers protectively over the project, channelled by Williams’ crystalline singing of Tosoff’s high arching tunes — the kind Mitchell herself could toss off with ease — to the painterly flourishes of Sonia Beckwith-Cole’s album art and the painting of daffodils by Tosoff’s mother, Wendy.

Family is big here. The lyrics to “Cool Embrace” are by Tosoff’s sister, Melissa Mansfield; those for “Living in the Past” are by her father Lloyd and uncle Ted. Tosoff will further reference Mitchell in performing her anti-war “The Fiddle and the Drum,” from Mitchell’s 1969 album *Clouds*.

The jazz “idea” — cool clubs with cool people — still carries considerable cachet. It signals music with class, intelligence and sufficient sophistication to elude the interest of pop’s grabbier schlockmeisters. Jazz is invariably the soundtrack at pricier eateries.

The use of jazz as hip Muzak bugs Mike Janzen to no end. “Some outside jazz circles use the word ‘jazz’ as another word for irrelevant or for music without real directions,” says the pianist, singer and composer originally from Manitoba, “like the kind of wallpaper music perceived to be played at weddings or events.”

Other emerging musicians have been warned about describing themselves in a jazz context. “When I started putting my music out into the world I felt people around me were discouraging me from labelling myself as a jazz musician, that it would limit my opportunities,” says Tara Kannangara, trumpeter, bandleader and Rex regular. “I feel, however, that this could be an opportunity to show people that jazz can be more than one thing.”

Janzen, who plays the Rex March 16, is even more adamant about that: “Being a jazz musician stands for something bigger.”

Ian Wright agrees. “Being categorized as jazz players helps our image more than it limits,” says the percussionist for the hard-charging local trio Autobahn. The jazz category, Wright adds, “is more an avenue to direct our attention towards, while observing our target market. The fact that we can go to a festival and perform in a setting of like-minded individuals that are aware of how vast the jazz category is before they buy the tickets is a huge benefit.”

“To be called a jazz musician is definitely only part of the picture,” says Chelsea McBride, an award-winning saxophonist and bandleader originally from Richmond, B.C. “I think there’s a lot of preconceived ideas about jazz, what jazz should be, who listens to jazz (and) where you should listen to jazz.”

Waterloo singer Rebecca Binnendyk is debuting her new CD, *Some Fun Out of Life*, at the Jazz Bistro March 18 and 19, which is a statement in itself.

“I am billed as a jazz singer,” she says, “but the music community in general is having a hard time classifying me in any particular genre. I like that! I think it’s necessary not to box ourselves into just a ‘jazz’ category since this might limit our listeners. Some people think ‘jazz’ is all crazy horns that their ears are not accustomed to. I like to think that the complexities of jazz allow me to do anything musically and get away with it.”

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