Sheila Jordan: Portrait of Sheila (2012) **Work Sample No. 1**

"If it wasn't for jazz music I wouldn't be alive today" — Sheila Jordan, "Sheila's Blues"

NEW YORK — Sheila Jordan had reached a crossroads. It was 1987 and the Detroit-born jazz singer was 58 and still essentially a cult figure known to a small cadre of musicians, critics and insiders as a treasure of unconventional yet soulful expression, artful versatility and magical spontaneity. She was also just sober after decades of alcohol abuse and a short but intense battle with cocaine. Jordan had worked for 21 years as a typist at a Manhattan advertising agency to support herself and her daughter. But the agency was merging with another company and Jordan had a choice: She could stay as a roving secretary or leave with a year's severance pay.

"I started to cry," Jordan remembers. "I was so upset. I thought, 'Oh my God, I'm losing my job. I don't think I want to float around from office to office.' Then a voice said to me real clear, 'You've been praying that you'd sing more, so shut up and take the money and run!'"

Run she has — right into the pantheon. At 83 and working more than ever, Jordan will receive the National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Masters Award on January 10 in New York. The $25,000 prize is America's highest honor in jazz and puts an exclamation point on the autumnal flowering of her career. It also represents a warm hug from the establishment after a lifetime in the shadows, where she overcame an impoverished childhood, bigotry, addiction and the vagaries of the jazz life, while willing herself into greatness.

There's no sound in jazz like Jordan in her prime. A white woman who embraced black culture, she transformed an unlikely featherweight soprano into a gossamer instrument, dancing unpredictably through time and pitch like a butterfly riding a gust of wind. She phrases like a horn; her primary influences have been instrumentalists, especially alto saxophonist Charlie (Bird) Parker, the bebop Prometheus who in the '40s took note of her precocious instincts and dubbed her "the kid with the million-dollar ears." Jordan improvises on many levels, slyly bending familiar lyrics of a standard into fresh, revelatory melodic shapes. Sometimes she makes up lyrics on the spot, ad-libbing charmingly discursive rambles. She's an elite scat singer, whose original vocabulary of made-up syllables, authoritative swing and taste for adventure sometimes suggests a white cousin to the black Betty Carter, the other innovative post-war jazz singer from Detroit.

Yet unlike many singers so intent on sounding "jazzy" that they make a mess of a song's meaning, Jordan's variations almost always deepen the intent of a lyric. Even today, with age taking a toll on the once-pristine purity of her voice and the accuracy of her pitch, her ballads can still bring listeners to tears. Exactly how she does this is a mystery, though the answer has to do with the alchemy of plainspoken honesty, storyteller instincts and musicianly command of time, harmony and phrasing.

Bassist Steve Swallow remembers a night with Jordan around 1960 at the Page Three, a dimly lit gay bar on Seventh Avenue in Greenwich Village, where she worked a couple of nights a week for years. The tune was "I'm a Fool to Want You," an essay on the dangers of desperate love. "I was just playing the roots of the chords on the downbeats and all of a sudden I just burst into uncontrolled sobs," says Swallow. "That had never happened before and it completely blindsided me. To this day that's an important and profound experience for me, but one I don't really understand. I've choked up more than once playing with her. Sheila tells the story of a song with such poignancy that I find myself listening and becoming involved with the words. She draws you into the narrative. She takes extraordinary chances and liberties, but she never distorts the meaning of the tune or the musical line. It has the integrity of a Roman arch; from point A to point B the tension is perfectly sustained. It's a high-wire act, and she never does fall."

"At times I wonder where my life would be if I'd never heard the music of Bird back when I was just a kid" — Sheila Jordan, "Quasimodo"

On a recent afternoon, Jordan sits at the dining table in her cozy, rent-controlled one-bedroom apartment on 18th Street in Chelsea where she's lived for half a century. Her landlord has offered her as much as $100,000 to move out — the place is probably worth $700,000 or more on the open market — but as Jordan says, "Where would I go?" Since 1981 she has also owned a modest farmhouse in upstate New York, where she recharges her batteries. An upright piano stands against the wall, and there's an assortment of moody paintings and photos, including one of Parker and several of her daughter, Tracey Jordan, an entertainment marketing consultant and Aretha Franklin's publicist. Tracey is the product of a brief marriage in the '50s to Parker's one-time pianist Duke Jordan, an African American.

Jordan stands a little over 5 feet tall, her round face framed by dark hair in a vintage pageboy. She's wearing a green sweater with red ladybugs on it, and there's an amusing dissonance between her grandmotherly countenance, girlish speaking voice and hipster vocabulary.

Born in Detroit to a teenage mother at home on a Murphy bed in 1928, Jordan (née Dawson) was sent to live with her maternal grandparents in Summerhill, Pa., a hamlet in coal mining country. The family was dirt poor and riddled with alcoholism. Jordan, who still speaks with an Appalachian twang, sang from the age of 3, mostly to chase the blues away. She returned to Detroit at 14, but life with an alcoholic mother and abusive stepfather who beat up her mom was trouble. When he began eyeing Jordan, fondling her, she moved out at 18, graduating from Commerce High School, where she studied secretarial skills.

Jordan sang Hit Parade tunes in talent shows, but one day in early 1946 she was at a downtown burger joint and someone dropped a nickel in the jukebox and punched up Charlie Parker's newly minted "Now's the Time," a founding text of modern jazz. Parker plays an electric solo, filled with swooping blues ideas and crystalline double time. "I heard four notes, man, and I gotta tell you my heart was about to jump out of my throat and the hair rose up on my arms and I felt faint!" says Jordan. "That was it! I still get goose bumps."

Detroit's post-war jazz scene was entering a golden age fueled by an explosion of young talent quick to pick up on bebop. Jordan was at the epicenter, becoming friends with peers like pianists Barry Harris and Tommy Flanagan and guitarist Kenny Burrell — all now NEA Jazz Masters, too – and hanging out at the Club Sudan, a Paradise Valley nightspot friendly to those under 21 because it didn't sell booze. She met Skeeter Spight and Leroy Mitchell, young black singers who were already putting words to curlicue bebop lines and scat singing in the new style. Soon they were a trio: Skeeter, Mitch and Jean (from her middle name, Jeanette). To this day she still sings Spight and Mitchell's lyrics to bop anthems like "Little Willie Leaps" and "Confirmation."

Jordan devoured Parker's records like chocolate. When he came to town to play the El Sino, she dolled herself up in red lipstick, grabbed her mom's birth certificate and some smokes and tried to con the door man. Turned away, she and her buddies snuck around to the alley, where Parker opened the stage door so they could soak up the music. She would later sit in and sing with him in Detroit and New York. A genius, Parker was also a junkie who would famously burn out like a comet at age 34 in 1955. Like many who knew him well, Jordan remembers a gentlemanly,

fiercely intelligent man well-versed in all of the arts. It was Parker, for example, who introduced her to modern painters and dropped off Bartok and Stravinsky records for her at the loft where she lived in New York.

"He always had a suit and tie on and he was very friendly and very intelligent and a sweetheart," she says. "He'd announce a tune and he'd use words this long (she opens her arms wide). They have such stories about him turning everybody on to drugs, but that is so wrong. I remember after I was with Duke (Jordan) in New York and Bird came up to the loft one time. Duke was nodding out on the couch and Bird said, 'Man, didn't you learn anything from me?'"

Black musicians accepted Jordan from the get-go, but she was hassled mercilessly by racist cops and others who couldn't stomach a white girl socializing or singing with black men. Jordan, Barry Harris and others were once chased in Hamtramck by violent thugs, narrowly escaping by hopping on a streetcar. She lost count of the number of times she was dragged to the police station for questioning for having the temerity to walk down the street or ride in a car with black friends, or even date them. Racial tension was particularly high in Detroit in those days. Thousands of Southern blacks and whites had migrated to the city for war jobs, precipitating a housing crisis; yet city fathers refused to integrate public housing. White workers struck the Packard Motor war plants in early June 1943 because blacks were hired to work next to them. By the end of the month, three days of race riots would result in 34 deaths. In a report on the violence, the Army general in charge of restoring order lambasted the Detroit police for their "harsh and brutal" treatment of blacks.

Jordan and saxophonist-composer Frank Foster, who would later find fame with Count Basie, lived together for a while, and one day around 1950 they and another interracial couple drove to Belle Isle for a picnic. Detectives stopped the car. "I had a cigarette and I threw it out the window and this cop crawled under the car to get that cigarette to smell it, because he thought I was smoking dope," says Jordan. "They took us down to the station, separated us from the men and started giving us the third degree. The cop said to me, 'I want your number. What is your mother's number?' I said, 'I don't live with my mother.' And I'll never forget what he said as long as I live. He said, 'You see this gun in my holster? I have a 9-year-old daughter at home, and if I thought I was gonna find her the way I found you two tonight, I would take this gun home and blow her brains out.'"

Today, when Jordan sees an interracial couple with a stroller, she makes a point of saying to them, “What a beautiful family!” She smiles, and they smile back.

“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine” — lyric by Jimmy Davis and Charles Mitchell

Jordan moved to New York in 1951 to be closer to Parker. She married Duke Jordan in 1953 and worked as a typist to support him; he abandoned her shortly after their daughter was born in 1955. Meanwhile, she began to look for opportunities to sing, studying phrasing, rhythm and harmony with the noted pianist-guru Lennie Tristano and landing a gig at the Page Three, where she honed her craft. She would work until 4 a.m. and pocket $6, half of which went to a babysitter. She’d sleep for two or three hours, take Tracey to nursery school and go to work. “Sheila was magic,” pianist Dave Frishberg writes about the Page Three at www.davefrishberg.net. “The customers would stop gabbing and all the entertainers would turn their attention to Sheila and the whole place would be under her spell.”

The progressive composer-pianist George Russell came in one night and was so moved that he financed a demo tape and brought Jordan to the attention of Blue Note, the hippest label of the era. That led to her first LP in 1962, “Portrait of Sheila,” a classic collection of standards and jazz repertory. The ethereal chamber setting of guitarist Barry Galbraith, bassist Steve Swallow and drummer Denzil Best sets off astonishing vocals as concentrated as espresso. “Falling in Love with Love” lasts just 2 ½ minutes, and Jordan swings through three uninterrupted choruses, bouncing playfully off Swallow’s bass lines. She orbits farther and farther from the original melody. By the final 32 bars she’s leaping octaves and leaning hard into the blues, italicizing the cynical lyric — “falling in love with love is playing the fool” — while reminding you that the heart often operates independently of the mind.

Jordan also cut “You are My Sunshine” in 1962 with Russell’s sextet on the LP “The Outer View” (Riverside). It is her most famous performance: Russell devised a surreal, 12-minute concerto of night-music dissonance, shifting tempos and shadowy flashes of melody and improvisation that suggest recovered memories. Halfway through the band stops, Jordan enters alone at a whisper, stretching the tune until it HAS to break yet doesn’t. She builds with the band, climaxing in chilly long notes sung without vibrato. Her intonation is not always perfect — it never has been— but the expression is incomparable: The icy-hot intensity and vulnerability devastates.

“Every time I sing a song that I might have sung a million times, I always feel like it’s the first time,” she says. “I think it’s just trusting the rhythm section or other instrumentalists. I never force improvisation. If I don’t feel it in my gut or heart, I’d rather sing what’s there.”

Despite critical acclaim, Jordan wouldn’t make another record under her name until 1975. She was still too hip for the room, but slowly the winds changed. Her flexibility widened her circle, and she recorded with musicians associated with the avant-garde like trombonist Roswell Rudd and pianist-composer Carla Bley. By 1979 she was singing arty contemporary material with pianist Steve Kuhn’s Quartet and reuniting with Swallow to sing evocative settings of the tightly lyric, rhythmic poetry of Robert Creeley. The records she made with Kuhn and Swallow for ECM are landmarks for adding to the relatively small amount of jazz where a vocalist is treated less as the primary focal point than simply as another horn in the ensemble. “Sheila always insisted that she wanted to be just part of the group,” says Kuhn.

The ’70s are also when Jordan, tired of blacking out on weekends, realized that alcohol was destroying her life. She stopped drinking in 1977 but, as she puts it, “changed seats on the Titanic” by acquiring a cocaine habit. She got so hooked that, as she told critic Francis Davis, when she broke a vial of coke in her bathroom, she picked out the glass she could see and snorted the rest. With the help of Alcoholics Anonymous she got clean for good in 1986 and left her day job at Doyle Dane Bernbach the following year.

“You didn’t think you could do it but you did” — poem by Robert Creeley

Jordan walks into the kitchen and returns with some tea. She rattles off her itinerary into June: concerts and workshops in New York, Ottawa, Seattle, Vancouver, Vermont, Maine, Japan, Denver and Israel. Since the early ’80s she’s issued more than a dozen recordings as a leader, including gems with Kuhn and duets with bassists Harvie Swartz or Cameron Brown, a no-place-to-hide setting Jordan pioneered and which only the bravest of singers would dare. Her profile had begun to rise slowly even before she left the ad agency but, once liberated, her renaissance picked up steam. The records, the accumulated critical huzzahs, the formal teaching she had begun to do at colleges and camps and a lifetime of personal connections all coalesced to help Jordan find a broader audience.

She’s never become a star on the order of Diana Krall or Cassandra Wilson, and she’s never had a manager; she still books her gigs herself. But she’s made a steady living as a jazz singer for the past 25 years, and her work dating to

the ’60s has influenced several generations of singers. Where Jordan was once shy on stage, she now jokes easily. Kuhn says her insecurities — the legacy of her family, addiction and lack of formal training — have vanished. Still, winning the Jazz Masters Award has left her gobsmacked, and she launches into an I’m-not-worthy monologue when the subject comes up.

Her champions know the opportunities she’s received since turning 60 should have come decades earlier, but Jordan doesn’t do anger and she doesn’t do bitterness. “I don’t do this music to be known,” she says. “I do this music to keep it alive. My calling is that Bird gave me this message as a kid, and I said I’m going to dedicate my life to this music.”