

Jazz Man

A Kessler Theater favorite son busts out a much anticipated CD. | *By Steve Carter | Photography by Justin Clemens* |

There's a very short list of jazz artists who've succeeded in the classical world as well: Wynton Marsalis, Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Keith Jarrett, Brad Mehldau, and Arturo Sandoval come to mind. But now add to the list: Dallas singer Damon K. Clark, whose new release, *Damon K. Clark Live at the Kessler, Volume 1*, is imminent. Already acclaimed for his unusual sensitivity, versatility and virtuosity, Clark's debut CD draws exclusively from his jazz repertoire, but he's as much at home with Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" as he is with Puccini's "Nessun Dorma." The mellifluous tenor minimizes the aesthetic distance between the classical and jazz worlds, explaining, "Jazz is akin to opera in the sense that opera requires technical skill and clarity, but there's a lot of dynamics written, and then the lyrics give you even more dynamics... jazz is essentially blues put to a classical treatment."

Live at the Kessler, Volume 1 is a great introduction to Clark's artistry. Called from several cabaret-style performances at Oak Cliff's Kessler Theater, with a stellar cast of supporting musicians, including Caleb McCampbell, Asher Barreras, Justin Heaverin and Neeki Bey, Clark's in rare form throughout, ballads to up-tempo. While his tessitura and timbre could be described as Bobby McFerrin-esque, his approach to the material is unique. Clark's scattling in particular exhibits a classical precision, while hinting at his affection for Ella Fitzgerald's and Mel Tormé's improvisational skills. But Clark's virtuosity never gets in the way of the song's meaning: he cites as an influence legendary Belgian singer-songwriter Jacques Brel for his "ability to deliver a lyric where it's emotionally potent." Clark's takes on the Gershwin's "They All Laughed" and "But Not For Me" are highlights, showcasing his astonishing range, playful scattling, melismatic mastery and elastic phrasing.

Originally from Los Angeles, Clark, 33 and single, grew up there and in small-town Louisiana. He started classical voice lessons early, but his high school band director turned him on to a trinity of the great jazz singers: Fitzgerald, Carmen McRae and Sarah Vaughan made inspirations include Andy Bey, Jon Hendricks and Tormé. Clark's a scrupulous singer who won't perform songs that don't resonate with him emotionally. "If I can't connect with the song in that way, I know the audience won't either," he says. "The reason I sing is to transport people into the world of that song. Some are character, some are narrative, some are simply descriptive. But whatever the song is, I want audiences to hear the water, have the backstory, and be with it." ■

Damon K. Clark will perform at an early CD release event on May 28, in the lobby of 1500 Elm, from 6:30 to 9:30 PM. damonkclark.com.

MAN ON THE MOVE Damon K. Clark

