An All-Star Tribute to Marlene VerPlanck
at William Paterson University

Ten musicians who performed and recorded with the late singer Marlene VerPlanck, including five pianists, as well as nine vocalists, were on stage at William Paterson University on September 23 for a musical tribute to the beloved singer. The event also raised funds for the university scholarship endowed in honor of Marlene and her late husband, trombonist/arranger Billy VerPlanck.

For the record, I was involved in the planning and production of this event in conjunction with Ray Hoffman, Dr. David Demsey, Coordinator of Jazz Studies at William Paterson University, Phil Pampinella, Marlene’s brother, and Barbara Marshall, Marlene’s sister.

Celebrating the life of Marlene VerPlanck proved to be a joyous occasion. She brought much joy and pleasure to a wide spectrum of people with her magnificent interpretations of the Great American Songbook, a rich musical catalog that she revered. Marlene engaged in an unending search for material that was often obscure, but always first-rate. She also debuted many songs with music by her husband, Billy VerPlanck, and words by a variety of lyricists, and was also open to recording songs by other current songwriters like Francesca Blumenthal, Ronny Whyte and Roger Schore.

She began her career as a big band singer for Tommy Dorsey and Charlie Spivak. Following her marriage to Billy, they settled in New York City where Marlene became one of the top advertising jingle and studio singers.

It was her appearance on the Alec Wilder NPR radio series American Popular Song that prompted her to seek wider recognition for her jazz-inspired singing of popular songs. Over the years, she developed an international fan base, recording more than 20 albums, and appearing in clubs and concerts all over this country, and extensively in Europe.

To celebrate Marlene’s musical life, an outstanding gathering of musicians, who had working relationships with her, gathered at the Shea Center for Performing Arts at William Paterson University on September 23.

One of her earliest musical colleagues from the studio days was the legendary guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli. He does not get out much these days, but when he heard about this tribute to Marlene, he and his wife Ruth insisted on attending. His daughter Mary brought her parents to the concert, and shared some words about Marlene from her father. It served as a nice launch pad for what was to come.

Longtime VerPlanck family friend, Ray Hoffman, hosted the concert. Ray, who also wrote occasional lyrics to Billy’s melodies, songs that became permanent parts of Marlene’s repertoire, proved to be a congenial and informative moderator.

To start the musical proceedings, Paul Pampinella, Marlene’s nephew, brought the Vintage Vocal Quartet, a group of which he is a member, down from Boston, where he teaches voice at the Berklee College of Music.

Paul, who also is the group’s guitarist, pianist Taylor O’Donnell, bassist David Scott and trumpeter Adam Gautille sang “Undecided,” “Stardust,” and “Their Hearts Were Full of Spring.” Paul’s sister, Kristen Deppe, then joined them, as they provided instrumental accompaniment for her to sing a lovely version of “Skylark,” a song that Marlene often included in her programs. The influence of Marlene on both her nephew and her niece was palpable.

Vocalist Annette Sanders was, like Marlene, another important presence on the jingle and studio scene. With support from pianist Mike Renzi, bassist Jay Leonhart and drummer Ron Vincent, Annette chose to offer up a touching reading of “Some Other Time,” and followed it with “I Thought About You.” The latter tune was the one that Marlene usually sang when invited to sit in at a gig.

Jay Leonhart was a frequent presence on bass at Marlene’s gigs. On this occasion, he invited pianist Tomoko Ohno and drummer Vito Lesczak, the regular members of his trio, to join him for two of his witty original compositions, “Playboy Club” and “Me and Lenny.” Leonhart writes lyrics that are highly individualistic and sings them in his own inimitable style.
It was then time to showcase a few of the talented jazz students at William Paterson University. In the 1990s, Marlene recorded two albums backed by a French band of four saxophones and rhythm called Saxomania. Dr. David Demsey, who is a superb reed player, recruited saxophonists William McKee, Tyler Greenwood and Alex DeLazzari, pianist Walter Gorra, bassist Michael Topping and drummer Hank Allen-Barfield to play two of the demanding charts that Billy wrote for the Saxomania sessions. Vocalist Mollie Friedman beautifully delivered the first selection, “Something to Live For.” Karen Heo swung nicely on “Everything But You,” with some fine scatting along the way.

When Billy VerPlanck died in 2009, a scholarship was endowed in his name for a jazz studies trombone student at William Paterson University. Now that Marlene has joined Billy, her name has been added to the scholarship. The proceeds from this concert all went into the scholarship fund.

To illustrate the impact this scholarship has had on the WPU Jazz Studies program, two former scholarship recipients, Matthew DeLeon and Caleb Rumley, and Amanda Bloss, a graduate trombone student, played a spirited chart on J.J. Johnson’s “Say When,” arranged by Rumley, performing with same Saxomania rhythm section.

The second half of the program started with Ray Hoffman being joined by three of the lyricists who worked with Billy, Leon Nock, Frank Grant and Tom Tierney, and Roger Schore, a lyricist who had several lyrics performed by Marlene. Each of them spoke about their experiences working with Marlene and Billy. Ray included a vocal on his first collaboration with Billy, “Sing Me to Sleep,” nicely accompanied by Russ Kassoff on piano.

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It was also announced that the Marlene and Billy VerPlanck music archive had been donated to the Library of Congress. Matthew Barton, Curator of Recorded Sound at the Library of Congress, spoke about how the VerPlanck archive would be integrated into their permanent collection.

Singer/pianist Ronny Whyte was not only a longtime friend of the VerPlanck’s, but also wrote the words and or music for several songs in Marlene’s repertoire. With help from Boots Maleson on bass and Ron Vincent on drums, he debuted a song that he composed, with lyrics by Frank Grant, “The Wonder of Music and Love,” inspired by their memories of the VerPlancks. Ronny then left the piano to be replaced by Russ Kasoff for another Whyte/Grant original, “I Love the Way You Dance,” a song included by Marlene on her 2015 album, I Give Up, I’m in Love.

Two of the pianists whom Marlene often used on her gigs were Tomoko Ohno and Tedd Firth, both graduates of the WPU Jazz Studies program. Each of them took the spotlight for one selection. Tomoko, joined by Jay Leonhart on bass and Vito Lesczak on drums, played a hip take on “What a Difference a Day Made.” Tedd was inspired as he explored “All in Fun,” a song that he was introduced to on his first gig with Marlene, a date that fittingly took place at WPU.

Sandy Stewart was another singer who was active in the studios and on jingles when Marlene was there. She has become known for her wonderfully perceptive and understated reading of lyrics as a pop/jazz singer. She got totally inside of “A Sleepin’ Bee,” and then sang an intensely personal version of “After You, Who?” that will echo in the memories of all who experienced it. Her peerless support came from her pianist son, Bill Charlap.

Bill Charlap and trumpeter Warren Vaché used to perform as a duo, and made one album together. They gave us a taste of their empathetic musical partnership, taking a sprightly run through “Pick Yourself Up.”

Singer/pianist Daryl Sherman just played the singer role for her portion of the program. The piano chair was filled by Mike Renzi, with Boots Maleson on bass and Ron Vincent on drums. Daryl began with a wonderful Cole Porter tune, “Why Shouldn’t I?” Her second selection was a song by Billy and a team of Marlene’s relatives, the haunting “Rainbow Hill,” a song that Daryl included as a special tribute to Marlene on her most recent album, Lost in a Crowded Place.

It was now time to wrap things up with a song that Marlene often used as a closer, “Before the Parade Passes By.” Tedd Firth created a superb arrangement that featured Warren Vaché stating the melody before all of the singers joined in, alternating the lines among them as designated by Tedd’s chart, and finishing the concert on another high note.

The response from the audience was wildly positive throughout the afternoon. All of the performers were inspired by the occasion, and the indefatigable spirit of Marlene VerPlanck was in the air during the entire event. It was a special day for a special lady!

Thanks to Ray Hoffman much of the Marlene VerPlanck memorial tribute concert can be viewed online at the following links: Part 1: vimeo.com/294072175 and Part 2: vimeo.com/294230452