

CALENDAR

JAZZ REVIEW

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Susie Hansen leaves a full house happy

BY DON HECKMAN
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Susie Hansen is one of the Southland's busiest musicians. And it's not just because her listeners are eager to hear a Midwest girl with Scandinavian roots and classical violin training play jazz-tinged salsa music. The evidence of that skill makes itself apparent before she finishes her first number. More to the point is that she does it so well that her audiences are usually a blend of avid dancers as well as music fans eager to hear the jazz elements that are always simmering at the center of her performances.

Her appearance at Spazio in Sherman Oaks on Friday night was no exception, with the jazz emphasis heightened by the decision to perform with a quintet rather than the larger, horn-brightened ensembles she uses for more dance-oriented appearances.

Hansen's opening tune set the pace with a surprisingly effective transformation of the old Nat King Cole classic "Nature Boy." Wrapping her warm violin sound lovingly around the atmospheric melody (written by Eden Ahbez but strikingly similar to a theme by Dvorak), she urged it through several sets of intensifying, gripping variations.

Other unusual choices followed. The soaring melody of Antonio Carlos Jobim's lyrical bossa nova "Dindi" was enhanced by upbeat Latin swing. Then Hansen somehow managed to recall both the rhythmic propulsion and lush textures of the Count Basie Band with a supercharged version of "Shiny Stocking" in which her burnished violin sound led the way through the climactic final choruses. Another unlikely choice -- the Landesman-Wolf torch song, "Spring Can Really Hang You Up The Most" -- emerged as a sensuous, floating bolero. And Hansen's own tune, "La Pregunta," enhanced by occasional soft background vocal oohs and ahhs, was a lovely, arching melody crying for lyrics.

Hansen did not neglect the members of the capacity crowd eager to get their dancing shoes moving. Good bandleader that she is, she alternated her more unusual programming choices with irresistible salsa rhythms, jamming Spazio's modest dance floor with happily twirling Terpsichorean devotees.

Hansen's high-spirited performance was the kickoff event of a four-night ramp-up that climaxes tonight at Spazio with the celebratory songs of Judy Chamberlain and the piano stylings of Bill Cunliffe.