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Emerson, Frank and Bobby

Vocal legends get local treatment

BY AUGUST MARCH

Emerson Corley digs Frank Sinatra. And Emerson Corley digs Bobby Darin too. The lauded lead singer of Burque's big-cool jazz ensemble, Entourage or just EJazz, is known for challenging audiences with deep dives into the American Songbook, trips down a musical river that plunge listeners into a world that flows downstreant with grand articulation, navigating the rocks and eddies and swooping shores with aplomb.

But taking cues from jazzers of the past is not enough for Emerson, a gifted alto with a propensity for style and sonic surety who brings relevance to the work they inhabit through keen arrangements and a killer band filled to the brim with hot players. It also helps that Corley can sing like nobody's damn business rocking it on everything from ballads to barn burners.

The vocalist's latest project is a curated performance of the work of two pre-rocanrol musical icons, Frank Sinatra and Bobby Darin. Both of these dudes are still legitimately part of the American popular culture pantheon, Elvis be damned. As such, their work isn't so obscure as to scare off millennials afraid of the unknown or Gen Xers burnt on what was underground freaky-styly in their youth. Sure, stuff like this attracts the cyan-haired among us, but can it fill the bill in 2018?

Corley is confident that it can and has prepared a program filled with information about another conflicted world in transition—early '60s America—where music made a difference. With that very combination of chill chops and for real relevance, how can concert-goers go wrong?

Come along then readers, as *Weekly Alibi* chats with Emerson Corley about cultural change,

musical relevance and a damn good time to be had on Aug. 11, at the Albuquerque Museum Amphitheater when EJazz Swings Bobby and Frank.

Weekly Alibi: So tell me all about this concert, it's the last of the Jazz Under the Stars series for 2018, amirite?

It's been about a year in the making. I got this idea about a year ago. The reason it came about was because I was reading an article about how Bobby and Frank really went to bat against racial injustice. When they were singing in Vegas—they were 21 years apart—that was at the beginning of the civil rights movement here in the US. Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Sammy Davis Jr., they weren't allowed to sing in the same clubs because they were black. I read that both Bobby and Frank got really angry about that; later they refused to perform in the segregated clubs.

I didn't know that.

That's the whole thing that got this project started for me. It was the spark. I thought to myself, "I wanna do this show, not only because I love the music, the arrangements, but also because of the fact that they stood up to all the crap that was going on around them. That is very important to me now.

I think those types of struggles for progress are very important lessons for Americans in the midst of today's cultural upheavals.

It's about being chill in time that is not chill at all. All of this music is very timely, I think. It's a way to bring things up. At the New Mexico Jazz Workshop, we've focused on curated shows, it's a lot about music, obviously. But, it's also about telling a story. We want to do a show that tells an important story about America and American

music. When I applied to do this gig, I did just that. I wrote that I was going to tell a story through the eyes of Bobby Darin and Frank Sinatra, their interpersonal relationships, their lives and how they dealt with challenging times. Things were very confusing [for progressives] back then. These two would go to bat for their black colleagues, but at the same time they had to work in the milieu of groups like the Rat Pack.

Some would say that these pre-rocanrol American icons were themselves challenged, their hyper-male personas, the mob connections, are what I'm thinking of here.

[Laughs] You couldn't be more spot on. Both men were products and victims of the time and culture that they came from. Hyper men. We learned from that, we've evolved into what we are now as a result of that part of [pre-rocanrol] popular culture.

So why does their music still resonate with listeners of all ages?

Well, it's part of the American Songbook. And I really think the music is timeless because it is so well-crafted, as far as pop goes. I don't think either of these guys would have ever dreamed that people would still be listening to this kind of music 70 years on.

What can concert-goers expect at this show? I know that when I think of Bobby Darin I think of "Mack the Knife" and "Beyond the Sea."

Both of these guys are still a big part of pop culture. With Sinatra, he's etched into the fabric of America. Bobby died young, at 37, so he didn't have as much time to build up a big repertoire, like Sinatra did. We do a lot of his tunes. I think

it's natural for big bands to gravitate toward his work because the songwriting, by Sammy Cahn and Jimmy Van Heusen is stellar. Of course I also like Sinatra's style, that urbane, yet relaxed late-'50s look. My number one favorite Frank Sinatra tune is "Fly Me to the Moon." We'll definitely do that.

Who's in the band these days?

Roger Baker, our arranger, plays the piano. Dimi DeSanti plays guitar. Maren Hatch handles the bass and Jon Bartlit plays the drums. The sax section is Lee Taylor, Sarah Griego and Michael Christmas. Our trumpet section consists of J.Q. Whitcomb, who is flying in from New York for this gig, Brad Dubbs and Bruce Dalby. On 'bones we have Micah Hood and Ryan Finn. But get this, we have a special guest too. Lisa Coffey, the harpist from Frank Sinatra's band will be joining us too!

That should add a heavenly sound to the whole of the proceedings, eh?

Frank loved the harp. He was obsessed with having a hot harpist in his band. He literally used to put the harp player on a pedestal.

I love that. I can't wait to hear the sounds of a harp sitting in and jamming with you all.

It's going to be an amazing way to top off a summer of amazing performances, that's for sure.

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NMJW Jazz Under The Stars Presents
EJazz Swings Bobby and Frank
Saturday, Aug. 11, 7pm
Albuquerque Museum Amphitheater
2000 Mountain Rd. NW • \$15 to \$18
Tickets available at holdmyticket.com