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## Deborah Brown's vocal highlight happy meeting of Broadway and jazz

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Two of America's greatest cultural exports are jazz and the American musical, and like the ubiquitous melting pot, the forms meld together and influence each other.

The Kansas City Jazz Orchestra, now in its 10th year, opened its second season in Helzberg Hall with a celebration of "The Great American Songbook." Internationally renowned vocalist Deborah Brown, who is also a Kansas Citian, joined the orchestra for an excellent collaborative performance led by artistic director Clint Ashlock. The program featured works from Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Cole Porter and a host of Broadway legends, along with Charlie Parker, Fats Waller and Pat Metheny.

The concert Friday night was bittersweet, however, given the recent passing of artistic director and baritone sax player Kerry Strayer. Widely respected, his influence on the Kansas City jazz community was apparent. Strayer had been with the group since its inception and they dedicated this entire season to his memory.

The ensemble performed his arrangement of "Angel Eyes," featuring Mark Cohick on baritone sax. The piece had a smoky back-room attitude, with a hint of noir: sophisticated, a little gritty and touched by melancholy.

Despite its deceptively mellow start, the show became a swinging, driving, piercing, pulsing example of the timelessness of the big band, with intricate horn lines, impressive dynamic contrasts, lean, fluid solos and a take-charge rhythm section.

Brown displayed an exceptionally elastic vocal ability, from a dusky, throaty low range to bright, sparkling high tones, with effortless turns and trills in between, whether "Always" or "Honeysuckle Rose." She connected with her fellow musicians on stage and to the audience with a sense of engaging thoughtfulness inherent to a world-class performer.

She also scatted proficiently and tastefully. Her syllabically gymnastic performance continued this demonstration of musicianship, especially in Eumir Deodato's "A Little Tear," when she matched the extended tutti horn line rhythm for rhythm, note by note.

Even though the Broadway standards set the scene, the jazz tunes stole it, especially the vocalese.

"It goes by fast, but every word I say does make sense," Brown assured the audience with a laugh before launching into a rendition of Parker's hot, fast, and melodically angular "Donna Lee," contrasted to the soulful "For the Time Being," set to a Metheny tune.

Returning onstage for the standing ovation, Brown offered an intimate encore, accompanying herself on piano for her own lyrics to Metheny's "Always and Forever."