

The Star-Ledger

Newark Museum's Jazz in the Garden series off to a swinging start

by Zan Stewart/The Star-Ledger

Monday June 29, 2009, 6:49 PM

An assured singer who delivered with zest and feeling, Antoinette Montague entertained an enthusiastic crowd Thursday afternoon at the Newark Museum.

The concert ushered in the museum's 44th annual Jazz in the Garden series, produced by Sheila Anderson, who is also an on-air personality at Newark-based WBGO-FM (88.3). The concert series continues Thursday through the end of July. Held in the museum's Alice Ransom Dreyfuss Memorial Garden, with its broad lawn and brace of stunning trees, the show drew around 600 listeners under skies that ranged from cloudy to sunny.

Dressed in a striking orange top and shimmering gold flats, Newark native Montague, who lives in Fairfield, Conn., was backed with aplomb by a top-flight quartet: tenor saxophonist and flutist Bill Easley, pianist Tommy James, bassist Hassan Shakur and drummer Wally "Gator" Watson.

She worked hard, digging into her songs, and talking to the audience, telling a story or two as she did. Occasionally, she left the bandstand to move out onto the grass while singing, further engaging her fans. And, smartly, she mixed up her material, going with a little bit of everything.

After a solidly swinging instrumental version of Ellington's "Cottontail," with Easley, James, Shakur, and Watson all playing with gusto, Montague began with a hearty "Let the Good Times Roll" -- which displayed the punch she packed in her alto voice. She got the crowd clapping along with her and the band, adding a bit of showbiz flair.



John Munson

Antoinette Montague performs at the Newark Museum's Alice Ransom Dreyfuss Memorial Garden on Thursday.

Then came the Temptations' "Get Ready," done with a swing beat and a robust vocal, with Montague holding out notes with pizzazz. A deft segue was "Behind the Smile," her original from a soon-to-be-released CD. The story of happiness tinged by disappointment boasted well-crafted lyrics.

Also lyrically enticing were Iola Brubeck's words to "Summer Song," composed by her husband, Dave Brubeck. Montague tenderly offered this modern and poetic piece.

In saluting the women in the audience, the singer went with "Miss Celie's Blues (Sister)," from the film "The Color Purple" and drawn from her 2006 Consolidated Artists Productions CD, "Pretty Blues." For the men, she chose the invigorating "Swing, Brother, Swing," which sounded like a vocal version of the introduction to the swing classic, "Sing, Sing, Sing."

Other highlights were a stroll through "Pure Imagination," a percolating "Just Squeeze Me" and an emotive "God Bless the Child."

A rousing blues provided the aesthetic finale (there was one more number, Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On") on which Montague invited three guest singers to join her. After a bit of "I'd Rather Drink Muddy Water" from the leader, where she got the crowd to sing-a-long, Cynthia Holliday tackled "I Ain't Doin' Too Bad," Carrie Jackson romped through "Mama, He's Treating Your Daughter Mean," and Solomon Hicks addressed "Every Day I Have the Blues."

The series continues this Thursday with bassist Nilson Matta and Brazilian Voyage, July 2, followed by South Orange drum maestro T.S. Monk, July 9; trumpeter Cecil Bridgewater, July 16; and Glen Ridge tenorman Adam Niewood and his Rabble Rousers, July 23. The series concludes with alto saxophone great Lou Donaldson, July 30. In the event of rain, performances take place in the Billy Johnson Auditorium.

Zan Stewart is the Star-Ledger's jazz writer. He is also a musician who occasionally performs at local clubs. He may be reached at zstewart@starledger.com or at (973) 951-3821.

Newark Museum's 44th Annual Jazz in the Garden Series

When: Thursdays, 12:15-1:45 p.m., through July 30.

Where: Alice Ransom Dreyfuss Memorial Garden of the Newark Museum, 49 Washington St., Newark.

How Much: \$3; members and children, free. Call (973) 596-6550 or visit newarkmuseum.org.