



All that jazz

November 23, 2011

An Evening with Chaka Khan

A Rare Jazz Quartet Performance

Monday and Tuesday at 7:30 p.m.

SOLD OUT

[The Birchmere](#)

3701 Mount Vernon Ave.

Alexandria, VA

[Interview By The Washington Blade: AMERICA'S LEADING GAY NEWS SOURCE](#)

Legendary singer Chaka Khan, who's gearing up for a two-night limited engagement at the Birchmere Monday and Tuesday, took a few minutes on the phone from her Los Angeles home to talk about her upcoming concerts, her philosophies of live performance and why she can't get enough of her hero Joni Mitchell.

BLADE: Tell us a little about what you have planned for next week at the Birchmere.

KHAN: It will be a nice mix but everybody should know going into it, there will be jazz. I think everybody will be happy though. I'm gonna do some Joni Mitchell songs, a lot of my jazz songs and then I'll do some of the hits that people know me by.

BLADE: Have you been touring with this kind of show or is it a one-off? I know you've done many jazz concerts in the past.

KHAN: Oh yes, for years. But these are just one offs.

BLADE: And you're going to Japan in the new year for a tour?

KHAN: Yes

BLADE: Jazz or other stuff?

KHAN: That will probably be more of my contemporary stuff with some jazz in there too.

BLADE: And for a show like you have planned at the Birchmere, approximately how much of the material will be stuff you've recorded versus standards or other material that you haven't recorded?

KHAN: Let's say about three-fourths of the stuff you'll hear is stuff I've recorded.

BLADE: Joni Mitchell is another singer who did significant jazz work alongside her pop stuff. Which of her songs will you be covering? I'm sure you'll be doing, well, of course right now I can't think of it, the song from "Wild Things Run Fast" that you recorded.

KHAN: "Ladies Man," yes of course I'll be doing that.

BLADE: Yes, that's it. I could totally imagine you singing "Moon at the Window" too.

KHAN: Yes, that's another good one. I'm doing a few others of my favorites, I mean I could go on and on and on, but some of my favorites at the moment like "Hissing of Summer Lawns," "Sunny Sunday" and a few others. I'll keep some surprises.

BLADE: So it sounds like you've gotten to know Joni a little. Have you been able to spend time with her and get to know her beyond just expressing your admiration?

KHAN: Oh yes, we've spent a good bit of time together.

BLADE: I'll get back to your concerts in a second, but this is fascinating since she's become rather reclusive. What's she like one on one? I know she's quite outspoken.

KHAN: Yes, very outspoken. She's really a philosopher at heart. She's truly one of the brightest geniuses we have. Certainly a musical genius but in every other way as well. I love to just listen to her talk and speak on current events and blah blah blah, you know, all sorts of things. She's just so buried in, you know, what's going on. She knows everything, as you can tell.

BLADE: Did you like her last album "Shine"?

KHAN: Oh yeah, I like everything she does.

BLADE: Do you think she'll record again?

KHAN: Well she's moved up to Canada again and I think she's kind of chilling a bit but I think she's writing. I hope so. I'd be devastated if she never did another album.

BLADE: When you're singing, from a vocal standpoint, how is the interpretation different than say, funk or pop?

KHAN: Well, it's really not. I approach them all the same, with the same spirit. Some require a little more technique. Jazz requires a bit more of a cerebral application than the songs I've been doing, you know, for a hundred years. So it's good. I just love singing jazz and I love singing other people's stuff that I really relate to. Some I relate to so much, it feels like I actually wrote it. So, you know, the fundamental approach is the same.

BLADE: What kind of musicians will you have with you?

KHAN: We started out with just a quartet but we just added a horn player. I think we'll have some singers too because some of the more contemporary stuff I'll do will require that.

BLADE: How long are your shows? Do you feel you have to play a certain amount of time or sing a certain number of songs for people to feel they've gotten a full evening of entertainment?

KHAN: Well usually there's a time limit with the promoter. I could go on singing all night if I had the opportunity, but yeah, it's usually about an hour to 90 minutes.

BLADE: Is it vocally taxing to sing for that long or even during a two-hour concert?

KHAN: No, not at all.

BLADE: Lots of other singers, like Diana Ross and Aretha Franklin, have primarily had pop or R&B careers but done lots of jazz on the side here and there. Do you like their jazz material?

KHAN: I like "Good Morning Heartache" (Ross) and a lot of the Billie Holiday stuff she did. But you know, when I get in my car, I put on Miles Davis, Ella, Joni — that's who I listen to. The originals.

BLADE: What will you be doing for Christmas?

KHAN: Working.

BLADE: Recording or giving concerts?

KHAN: A tour. Singing. Working. I almost always work through the holidays and on my birthday.

BLADE: Do you feel any sense of camaraderie with the other singers who came up and got their start in Chicago, like the Staple Singers for instance?

KHAN: Absolutely. I know most of the Chicago-based singers. You know, we have paid a certain amount of dues by coming up there. There's a mark of excellence you earn. Chicago's not an easy audience. It's like the "Gong Show." They will totally gong you if you're not up to part. You have to have your stuff together coming out of Chicago. You go through a great deal of training and pay a great deal of dues coming out of that city singing.

BLADE: When you're on stage and doing music that's more loose and has more room for interpretation, to what degree are your vocal flourishes and interpretive nuances planned ahead of time as opposed to either totally spontaneous or ways you've sung certain lines and phrases other times?

KHAN: I'm totally spontaneous. When I'm on stage, I connect to some higher force actually. I often truly and honestly have to ask, "Was it a good show?" because I go into what you'd kind of call a hypnotic state. That's how I know this is my calling.

BLADE: Is it hard to get to that place?

KHAN: It takes a little while. I'm usually a little nervous for the first three songs or so. I want to please, so usually during the first few songs I'm a little nervous, feeling out the crowd before I go on and then once I'm on and warmed up, I'm totally cool.

BLADE: So what about your gay fans? Are they any more vocal or exuberant than other fans? Or do you even think of your fans as being gay or straight?

KHAN: Oh please. I definitely have the gay audience and they have been the most supportive of me hands down. I truly truly do appreciate my gay audience because they've been there for me when times were tough and I find them, I don't know, less fickle or something. ... They really love the artists they love and it's for real. I really like that.

BLADE: For songs in a show like you have planned at the Birchmere, especially the material you haven't recorded, where do the arrangements come from?

KHAN: Well I arrange all the vocals. And I've worked with many different, really great producers over the years so they've done some of them. But I play bass and drums so I truly have a true musical understanding of every aspect of it. I have to say I really have a hand in it all.

BLADE: But jazz can be so improvisational — to what degree is it mapped out ahead of time, "OK, we'll have a sax solo here, then ..."

KHAN: Well what we do is I give the musical director a list of the songs I want to sing, then he rehearses the band and then once they've got it down, I go in and I'll do a rehearsal, a run through and anything I want to change musically, that's what we do.

BLADE: And who is your musical director for these shows?

KHAN: Melvin Davis

BLADE: Thank you for your time, Miss Khan. And happy Thanksgiving.

KHAN: And the same to you.