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Two Skirts & a Shirt: René Marie, Carla Cook, Allan Harris

Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola *Broadway at 60th Street* (212) 258-9595,
through Sunday



This power trio features three exceptionally strong voices and minds, all with different approaches, who make their similarities and their differences work as strengths in uniting for a very specific concept. They take socially

conscious songs of the Motown era and outfit them with jazz chords and a swinging beat (courtesy of pianist Lafayette Harris), maintaining the songs' messages and integrity. The project is closely intertwined with Ms. Marie's new album, "Voice of My Country," but the three principals are so well matched that no one pulls focus from the others for very long. In reworking "Ball of Confusion," "Tryin' Times" and "Compared to What" as jazz vocal-trio fodder, the group reminds us what we like best about both jazz and classic soul.

The Two Skirts & a Shirt show opens with a self-titled original semi-comic blues; it's a trifle misleading, more like a 1960s TV variety-show opening. Yet the idea of jazz singers working together is so unusual that it necessitates some sort of explanation. The collective's point of departure isn't Lambert, Hendricks and Ross—the most obvious model

for a jazz vocal trio—but in its swinging blend of soul and jazz with Gospel overtones, I heard echoes of Andy and the Bey Sisters.

The show is evenly divided between group numbers and individual features. The politically motivated, fast-moving, ultra-wordy texts like the Temptations' "Ball of Confusion (That's What the World Is Today)" suit the ensemble better than most standards would: Let's face it, three people singing "Some Enchanted Evening" together would seem a little unkosher.

But where the Temptations essentially offered a unified sonic blend, the point of the Skirts & Shirt is the individual personalities. Ms. Cook and Ms. Marie are classic examples of particular vocalist types: The former is deep-voiced and firmly grounded in tradition (as on her solo, Marvin Gaye's "Inner City Blues"), while the latter is more playful and eclectic (as when she delivered "Them There Eyes," the only songbook standard of the evening, so fast that the lyrics became scat syllables). For his part, Mr. Harris specializes in making every song into a party—he could have you boogying to "Gloomy Sunday." Yet when he sang "Bring Him Home," which, like the rest of the "Les Miserables" score, is usually hopelessly pretentious, he interlaced it with a spoken interlude involving an Iraq War veteran and it came out like a heartfelt and personal anthem.

One point worth protesting, in song or otherwise, is that all three artists are woefully under-recorded: Ms. Cook has only three albums to her credit, the most recent in 2001; the new "Voice of My Beautiful Country" is Ms. Marie's first release since 2004. It's a brilliantly conceived package of Americana, focusing on folkloric material, in which the zebra-pattern gown that Ms. Marie wears on the cover serves as a metaphor for her music. She alternates between light and darkness, jazz and rock evergreens (from Dave Brubeck to "Drift Away" and "White Rabbit"), and between brilliantly snappy, hard swingers and mournful moods that make the slow blues seem cheerful by comparison. Her music is always about contrasts—like her now-classic

mix of "Suzanne" and Ravel's "Bolero" into a kind of chocolate-vanilla ice cream Cohen.

Even though Mr. Harris and Ms. Cook—and virtually everyone else in music—are rarely as experimental as Ms. Marie, as a trio the three bring something entirely new and worthwhile to the bedraggled field of jazz singing. The only remaining question I had as I left Dizzy's was: When are they going to learn "Subterranean Homesick Blues?"