

SXSW review: Kat Edmonson at Elephant Room

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(The Elephant Room, 12:45 a.m. Saturday, the Elephant Room)

By the time one o'clock on the last night of South By Southwest rolls around, one feels a strong kinship with the guy who said, "I don't want the ham and I don't want the cheese. I just want out of the sandwich."

But every few years, Fate hands you a present for your perseverance, and this year it came in the form of a willowy young jazz singer named Kat Edmonson, who had the unenviable task of hosting the last showcase of the last night of the festival at the Elephant Room.

I'd been turned on to Edmonson by a fellow writer at this paper, who hands out raves about as often as Scrooge hands out Christmas bonuses. So when he all but nominated Edmonson for homecoming queen, I paid attention.

Happily for the capacity crowd at the Elephant Room, Edmonson was just as naturally gifted and supple a vocalist as advertised. Much of her Great American Songbook material was familiar: Hello, there, "Summertime," how's it going "Angel Eyes," what's up with you, "Night and Day."

But Edmondson, her pianist partner Kevin Lovejoy and a great combo that included Ephraim Owens and Chris Maresh provided tasty, inventive and at times counterintuitive interpretation of those classics. A lot of the time, wisely, they stepped out of the way and let Edmonson's natural touch and pure tones (her vocals sounded almost like horn lines to this listener) have their way with the timeless material.

Edmonson is a slender young blonde who doesn't look old enough to buy a drink in the joint, let alone command center stage, but she falls naturally into the headliner's role. Even attired in jeans and a peasant blouse — not exactly the classic chanteuse's ensemble — she came across with aplomb and real authority.

A surprising version of John Lennon's "(Just Like) Starting Over" and a nimble rendition of "I Walk A Little Faster" brought an end to this writer's personal SXSW and Edmonson's set. I'm happy to see the 2009 edition of the festival recede into past tense, but I look forward to sitting ringside and watching Edmonson and her combo work again, real soon.