

# Sarah Dash is still a chameleon of the most musical kind

By Christian John Wikane

"Chameleon" (1976) was the last album that Labelle recorded in the '70s before group members Sarah Dash, Nona Hendryx and Patti LaBelle pursued solo careers in 1977. The back cover photograph depicted how, even through a cardboard sleeve, the group radiated a unique power. Music seemed to emanate from each of their faces. Sarah Dash, in particular, wore an expression of joy and elation on her flawless visage.

Decades later, that same smile illuminated the second of Dash's recent two-night stand at 54 Below as she opened her set with "I'm Still Here," a self-penned ode to survival and perseverance. From the very first line—"Been through so much in my life, everyday a different fight"—the singer had a story to share.

Accompanied by music director/pianist Terry Burrus, bassist Lonnie Plaxico and drummer Craig Holiday Haynes, Dash filled the room with a full-bodied tone. Hers was a voice that hardly needed amplification. The dozen white roses sitting atop the piano were a fitting backdrop for "I Only Have Eyes For You." Each word fell sumptuously from Dash's lips.

"Millions of people go by, but they all disappear from view." The way she caressed "from" made the well-known standard a delectable gift from Dash to the audience. Visiting the Cole Porter songbook, Dash prefaced "I Love Paris" with an amusing anecdote involving hairspray, hunting, and a Louis Vuitton bag (see one of her future shows to hear



The comparable Sarah Dash

the whole story).

"I love Paris in the winter when it drizzles/I love Paris in the summer when it sizzles," she sang turning "I" into a polysyllabic wonder. Porter himself would have been smitten by Dash's interpretation of his song. Count Basic vocalist Helen Humes also would have been pleased by the singer's sassy rendition of "Million Dollar Secret," a tune that gave Dash plenty of occasions to inject some humor into the proceedings.

A medley of "I Thought About You" and "What a Diff'rence a Day Makes" honored Carmen McRae, Sarah Vaughan and Dinah Washington—three artists that Dash said had "a profound effect on my life." The singer's tribute to three of jazz music's most influential vocalists was one of the evening's highlights. Through hand gestures and eye movements, she took no word or line of lyric for granted.

Her trio summoned an appealing, late-night jazz club ambience while golden stage light signified the dawn of a new morning on "What a Diff'rence a Day Makes". Towards the medley's conclusion, Dash seamlessly intertwined the lyrics and melodies of the two songs.

At moments, Dash's concert seemed part of a larger show that could have been titled *The Sarah Dash Story*, for many songs seemed to hold a personal significance for the singer, whether lyrically or by virtue of representing

a distinct time in her life. Her heart-stopping performance of Laura Nyro's "Buy and Sell" exemplified the latter.

Dash recalled when Labelle met the singer and worked with her on the Gamble and Huff-produced "Gonna Take a Miracle" (1971). "She was just as eclectic as we were," she said. "She wrote stories about when she lived on 8th Avenue. She wrote a song that says it all." Dash took the very personal lyrics from "Buy and Sell" and rendered them like a snapshot of old New York. Terry Burrus captured the soul of Laura Nyro on piano. Sarah Dash captured her heart.

To the sound of boisterous applause, Dash dedicated the next sequence to her years with Nona Hendryx and Patti LaBelle in Labelle. "We were the first Black group to play the Metropolitan Opera House," she said, recalling the 1974 concert where audience members were attired in "something silver," leading to a shortage of silver fabric throughout New York.

"They had to buy rolls and rolls of aluminum foil." Dash performed a trio of songs from the group's classic mid-'70s period that paved the way for theatrical artists like Janelle Monáe and Lady Gaga (though Labelle's singular musicality has yet to be matched).

Dash began the medley with "(Can I Speak to You Before You Go to) Hollywood," a song penned by Hendryx that was often the emo-

tional centerpiece of Labelle's concerts. Singing the solo verses that she and Hendryx recorded on the original *Pressure Cookin'* (1973) version, Dash proved that she's retained every bit of vocal power that still makes the song so compelling 40 years later.

"What Can I Do for You" and "Lady Marmalade" followed ("I know you know *this* lady," Dash quipped). As a three-member unit, Dash's musicians approximated the Meters' original groove on *Nightbirds* (1974) to remarkable effect. Dash broke "What Can I Do For You" down, and prompted the audience to echo the song's "love, love, love" refrain. Little cajoling was needed.

Dash followed the Labelle medley with a stirring version of "Ballad of the Sad Young Men," a song whose meaning has only multiplied over the years since its debut in *The Nervous Set*, the ill-fated Broadway musical inspired by the Beat generation that only ran for 23 performances in 1959. Vocalists have not only adopted "Ballad of the Sad Young Men" as a tribute to war veterans but also as a comment on pre-Stonewall gay subculture.

Dash explained that the song "applies to our everyday situations" and also noted that it will appear in *Continental* (2013), a documentary she participated in that traces the history and impact of the Continental Baths.

The somber tone of "Ballad of the Sad Young Men" shifted to the singer's more lighthearted rendition of "Make Someone Happy".

She seemed to taste the words as she sang, savoring the flavor of lines like "once you've found it, build your world around it". The life-affirming sentiment of the song also carried through to her encore, an inspiring version of Doc Pomus' "There Is Always One More Time".

However, Sarah Dash did not disappoint those awaiting the song that fans consider her signature number, "Sinner Man". The 1978 club hit came alive in the hands of the singer's trio while she intoned the song's scale-defying notes. Two members from the audience even joined Dash onstage for an impromptu dramatization of the lyrics.

The song was especially appropriate given that 54 Below is actually the basement of the original Studio 54, where "Sinner Man" was often incorporated into set lists by the club's most popular DJs.

Few artists could so effortlessly navigate disco, glam funk, Broadway gems, jazz standards, and original compositions in one set (and kudos to 54 Below for supporting such versatility). Just like the title of that classic Labelle album intimated so many years ago, Sarah Dash is a chameleon of the most musical kind.

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