

LONG, TALL & MELLOW: THE STORY BEHIND CHICAGO'S PREMIER VOCAL VIXEN, SHARA MAXWELL

By Lesley Yvonne Hunter

She's Long, She's Tall, She's Mellow. Her name? Shara Maxwell - the premier female jazz vocalist to grace the Windy City.

I had the pleasure of sitting down with Shara last week and finding out more about the background and inspirations of this phenomenal singer.

Growing up in Carbondale, Illinois, Shara was involved heavily in music from a young age, between singing in church and in school musicals. In college, she had the opportunity to pursue modeling and was able to travel internationally during her brief modeling career, but she fell quickly back into her true love—jazz.

In fact, the label 'long, tall and mellow' was given to Shara not due to her model looks, but as a result of admiration by a popular saxophone player, Von Freeman, who used to call Shara by this nickname



whenever he called her up on stage at New Apartment, a venue on the southside of Chicago where Von had Shara come and sit-in with him.

Shara ended up moving permanently to Chicago and studied with cabaret and jazz teacher, Ruth Allyn, who Shara credits with not only teaching her wonderful technique but also opening up performance opportunities to her in Chicago, including sit-ins at the Zebra Lounge every Monday night.

Other influences and musicians that Shara has

worked with or viewed as mentors include Lloyd Wilson, Stanley Jordan, Eric Schneider, Freddy Cole, Dave Green and Elaine Dame. She also admires Lady Gaga for bringing a nice peaceful calm voice about jazz, even with retaining her pop roots.

After Shara's introduction to the Chicago jazz scene, she took a break for a while as she gave birth to and raised her son, Hugo. She took a job in sales for a while, and although she still held a deep passion for music, Shara did not rush to get back into performing until her eight year old son cried to her one night, pleading "Please don't stop singing."

Shara states: "that was a pivotal moment for me, hearing my 8 year old beg me not to stop. I knew this was what I was meant to do."

Back in the game for 2 years, Shara has performed and been featured at favorite Chicago spots, including Pops for Champagne, The Drake Hotel, Underground Wonder Bar, Sip, Gibsons and others. She has also opened for renowned artists Stanley

Jordan and Fareed Haque and collaborated with successful clarinet and saxophone player, Eric Schneider—who she noted has been extremely supportive. "Hopefully, the day when my name is big, I can pass on the baton and return the favor," remarks Shara, in appreciation of Eric.

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Of course having a big name is far from easy in any industry, let alone music. When asked what the biggest challenge was in jazz and performing, Shara shared that there are many ups and downs: "People like you one moment,

the next moment they don't. Sex Drugs and Jazz and Roll. It's a daily struggle. Personal relationships can suffer and making money is difficult..." "You don't roll in the dough with jazz."

But even with all the challenges, I asked Shara "then why do you do it?" With a smirk, Shara responded: "Passion is who you are. Work isn't work if you love it and jazz and music calms my energy. It literally transforms me. I have to do it."

And so she is: on May 22nd, Shara will be recording an EP at the Chicago Recording

Company alongside Dennis Luxion on piano, Joe Policastro on bass, Jon Deitemyer on drums and Eric Schneider will be featured on horn. One of the songs featured on the EP is an original called "Perfect Fifth."

Two words to describe this EP? Upbeat and Sexy. Stay tuned for the EP debut in the near future and swing by the Windy City to catch Shara performing at Sip at Irving and Southport on May 29. Until then, Stay connected with this vocal vixen at SharaMusic.com, on Facebook as 'Shara Maxwell' and @SharaMaxwell on Twitter.

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