

## Have yourself a merry little Monday with vocalist Cyrille Aimee



Neil Tesser, Chicago Jazz Music Examiner  
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I don't care what else you have planned for Monday: make time to drop by Andy's (11 E. Hubbard), where the French-born singer Cyrille Aimée will appear with the Chicago Jazz Orchestra between 5 and 8. The Christmas shopping can wait, and in any case, you won't receive a better invitation this holiday season.



You may not have heard Cyrille Aimée, or even heard of her – even though she won the Montreux Jazz Festival voice contest in 2007 and the Thelonious Monk Competition in 2010. But that will change. Right now, Aimée stands among the top four or five jazz singers to emerge in the last quarter-century. I challenge you to disagree: make tracks to Andy's, give a listen, and tell me if I'm wrong.

With certain artists, you need to only hear a minute or two to realize you've found the real deal. You hear it in the sound – the intonation, the timbre, the ease with which it's produced. There's something in the rhythmic authority – you notice it the moment she moves from the first word to the next, the all but

immeasurable lilt that screams “swing” on even a breathy soft phrase.

And you hear something else: the pure joy that no artist can really fake; the confident pleasure that characterizes a musician who knows her own quality and simply has to share it. Even better when it comes with a cool commitment that leaves the listener to discover this quality for himself – not the case with lesser artists who seem compelled to hit you over the head with everything they can do.

With Cyrille Aimée, it's love at first note.

That note will be in tune – I've yet to hear her sing one that's not – and salty sweet, and likely as not, it (or one of its neighbors) will exhibit one of the qualities that we've come to admire among past icons of vocal jazz. It might be the throaty gurgle of Billie Holiday; or the girlish sprint that characterized Ella Fitzgerald's flights of scat fancy; or the swooping melisma that Sarah Vaughan employed to bewitch the world.

These brief echoes of the past don't predominate, however: they're grace notes, like cinnamon or cherry or chocolate in a complex armagnac. The main bouquet is Aimée's alone – a fresh, hearty alto, with smoke and clarity in equal measure, and none of the fluttery filigree that finds its way into too many records by too many aspiring divas.

It doesn't really matter in what format you encounter her. It might be in front of a big band such as the CJO, with whom she made her Chicago debut at Andy's back in the spring; or meshing gears with a straight-ahead combo, as on this year's delightful album recorded at the New York club Small's (with trumpet star Roy Hargrove in the backing band); or sparking a swing-guitar combo, as she did during the Gypsy Jazz Festival at the Green Mill in October.

Duo, backing quintet, big band: as soon as I find a format in which she doesn't absolutely shine, I'll let you know.

On the subject of "gypsy jazz" – a now politically charged designation for the guitar-led swing combos descended from the Romany guitar great Django Reinhardt – Aimée also sings several tunes on the recently released *A Very Gypsy Christmas* from guitarist Doug Munro. You can also hear her, maybe even at her best, on either of two scintillating albums that feature Brazilian fretman Diego Figueiredo as her only accompaniment.

Aimée actually entered her career via the gypsy-jazz caravan. Born to a French father and Dominican mother, she spent her teen years in Samois sur Seine, about 35 miles southwest of Paris. Samois was Django's last home, and remains the site of an annual "gypsy jazz" festival in his honor. The festival and its musicians were the source of Aimée's influence and training – and of her juggernaut swing, I'd imagine – and her expertise with the idiom sets her apart from most modern vocalists.

But as her resume suggests, and the video below proves, she's hardly bound by that genre.

So do yourself a holiday solid Monday: see Cyrille Aimée at Andy's, pick up one or three of her discs, and enjoy the rest of the season. And if you choose to call me Santa, that's your privilege and your right.

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Neil Tesser has written on and broadcast jazz in Chicago for over 35 years, for outlets ranging from the Chicago *READER* to USA Today to National Public Radio to *PLAYBOY* Magazine, and is the author of *The PLAYBOY Guide to Jazz* (1998). He has authored liner notes for more than 250 albums and has received both a GRAMMY nomination and the ASCAP Deems Taylor Award, as well as the first Jazz Journalists Association award for Excellence in Broadcasting.