

In her marathon Dakota gig, Ferrell proves to be vocalist extraordinaire

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Rachelle Ferrell seemed to be high on fumes from her 2010 gig at the Dakota. At Sunday's return engagement at the Minneapolis jazz club, the vocalist extraordinaire gushed about how great the crowd had been last year. Of course, she did this by singing the information. In fact, she did singing intros of her band members and pretty much conversed with the standing-room-only crowd by singing what she had to say.

At times, it was not easy to tell when the talking ended and the song began. Ferrell is an organic, in-the-moment performer who loves to improvise and just let the song grow and the music flow. For some listeners at the Dakota, that could be a little frustrating. Sometimes you couldn't tell if she was an inspired improviser or a vocal showoff?

Indeed, Ferrell, 49, has a magnificent vocal instrument. In one phrase, she could soar like Minnie Riperton and then get down like Larry Graham. She got jazzy, churchy, funky, ballad-y, soulful, scat-crazy— you name it. But, during Sunday's second set, it took her about 45 minutes to get into her groove.

Too much of the early part of the show was unfulfilling tastes of tunes from her upcoming album (her first in 10 years). She would do a chorus and maybe a verse of a new number like "Photo" but never build momentum. She'd find a head-nodding groove with her excellent four-man band on a selection like "Sister" (with the musicians sneaking in riffs from Steely Dan's "Babylon Sister") but never have emotional impact.

Then Ferrell took the Sunday night crowd to church with her effortlessly elastic voice on “I Can Explain.” She sat at the grand piano and engaged in a call-and-response with electric pianist Brandon Coleman. Moreover, Ferrell testified with some piercing screaming but she ended with a coo, prompting one Dakota-goer to shout: “Let the church say ‘Amen.’”

Ferrell did a little preaching before easing into “My Funny Valentine,” all feathery whisper before she demonstrated her ridiculously rangy voice with another emotional outburst. By now, she was in a zone. Even lightweight new-CD previews like a Prince-like “Sweat” and the Stevie Wonder-evoking “Birth Day” felt right.

A medley of a few of her better known 1990s R&B favorites, including “With Open Arms” and “Sentimental,” excited her faithful. And then, Ferrell turned the Dakota into “Twin Cities Got Talent” and invited singers to approach the stage and improvise while the band accompanied them.

Eight aspiring vocalists may have been a few too many, as the bit became both as alluring and off-putting as “American Idol.” Suffice it to say a scat-singing Ginger Commodore and a humming, crooning and vocal-effects-producing Q-Bear from KMOJ-FM wowed the crowd as well as Ferrell and her band.

After 2 hours and 20 minutes of Ferrell and friends (and this was the night’s second set), the Dakota-goers will undoubtedly be high on fumes from her Fer-nomenal performance.