

Nellie McKay: A one-person "Glee" with music from many eras

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She's still smiling. And so am I – and probably everyone else who was at the Dakota on Thursday night.

Not only does Nellie McKay have an infectious smile, she just looks like a party from another decade. On Thursday, the New York cabaret maverick wore a gold lame suit (skirt and jacket with big shoulders) that her mom found at a Santa Cruz thrift shop (for \$26) with perfectly matched gold vegan (she said) cowgirl boots from Nashville, of course. She tops it off with her blonde Mary Tyler Moore flip. She may look like Hot Lips Houlihan (Loretta Swit or Sally Kellerman, take your pick) dressed up as Doris Day, but she carries on like the entire cast of "Glee" in one person's body with an uncanny knowledge of different musical styles and eras that she doesn't hesitate to mash up in one song.

Oh, I've gushed about McKay, 28, before on this blog and in the Star Tribune. Her performance on Thursday – two 50-minute sets – was somewhat similar in content to her October gig at the Dakota. The big difference is this time she was accompanied by her own New York City trio (the newly named Aristocats, for this night anyway) instead of Twin Cities musicians from "A Prairie Home Companion." Her stoic, look-at-the-music-stand musicians seemed a little tentative compared to the Prairie Home aces who, like the fearless McKay, can play without a net.

Her repertoire drew heavily from her latest two discs, 2009's "Normal as Blueberry Pie: A Tribute to Doris Day" and 2010's "Home Sweet

Mobile Home.”

The most striking moment came out of the blue, as often happens with McKay. She wrapped up singing the always heart-warming “Dog Song” (from her 2004 debut) at the piano and stood up and seamlessly segued into Tom Waits’ “Straight to the Top (Vegas),” sounding like Louis Armstrong doing Waits as a hipster lounge singer. Priceless.

Other highlights included the joyous “A Tisket A Tasket” and the lusciously languid “Midnight Sun,” (after which she said: “The last song I sang a little better with Garrison [Keillor] holding a whip over my head”; she was on PHC two weeks ago).

One of McKay’s most precious qualities is that, even though she is a deeply talented jazz singer/pianist/ukulele player, she is an outward, not inward, performer, one who is intent on entertaining her audience without compromising her artistic integrity.

To top it off, she is LOL funny. Her zingers come out of nowhere. “Oh, you’re from L.A.,” she said apropos nothing to someone named Gary. “Please, oh, please, get us on the ‘Twilight’ soundtrack.” Later, between songs, McKay said her bass player is the Mick Jagger of the band (actually he looks more like AC/DC’s singer with long hair). “As long as he’s with my mother at security, he’ll never get busted for pot again at the airport,” she said. Then speaking of security, she added: “My lesbian friends tell me: Just enjoy the patdown.”

Opening was local singer-songwriter Chris Koza, who sounded like a one-man version of early Simon & Garfunkel and became probably the first person ever to use “cartographer” in a song. McKay will perform again on Friday at the Dakota.

Thursday's set list:

Set 1: The Very Thought of You/ Beneath the Underdog/ Home Sweet Mobile Home/ ??/ Dispossessed/ Unknown Reggae/ Send Me No Flowers/ Dindi (Antonio Carlos Jobim)/ A Wonderful Guy/ If I Had You/ Mother of Pearl/ Adios

Set 2: instrumental > There'll Be Some Changes Made/ Sentimental Journey/ Bruise on the Sky/ A Tisket, A Tasket/ Midnight Sun/ Mean to Me/ Caribbean Time/ Please/ Confess/ Bodegas/ The Dog Song > Straight to the Top (Tom Waits) ENCORE Ding Dong > I Wanna Get Married