

Kurt Elling

Kurt Elling's debut Blue Note album, *Close Your Eyes*, released in spring, 1995, heralded the arrival of a young and dynamic jazz singer. His singular approach, though it drew on such sources as scat singing, vocalese and poetry, was unlike anything heard before. Now to accompany that well-received, Grammy-nominated premiere, comes *The Messenger*. Here, Chicago-born-and-based Elling, just 29, takes his unique gifts a step further, offering selections that continue to set a standard for new directions in jazz vocal performance.

Elling was destined to be a great jazz singer. Born on November 2, 1967, he started singing in church, then studied violin and French horn. He didn't discover jazz until he was a student at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, where he majored in history and minored in religion. A friend turned Elling on to Dave Brubeck, Dexter Gordon, Herbie Hancock and Ella Fitzgerald. "It seemed natural to start singing that music," he says, "and I started scat singing almost the day I started singing jazz."

After graduating from Gustavus in 1989, Elling returned to Chicago and became a graduate student at the University of Chicago's Divinity School. But music began to take hold. Elling discovered jazz singer Mark Murphy and was entranced by his mixture of singing and employment of beat poetry. He started singing with Chicago sax legend Von Freeman and saxophonist Ed Petersen, who led a band at that jumping point, the Green Mill. The singer would get tremendous response on the bandstand and found his interest in his studies decreasing. So, after three years, and one credit shy of graduation, Elling left school in January, 1992.

One day in late 1993, Peterson decided to give Elling some "advice" that had a profound influence on him. "I had been scatting all the time, and had made real progress," he says, "but Ed took me aside and told me, 'Every musician can scat. But when you make up your own lyrics when you're singing, that's cool. That's your strength.'" This style, Elling calls "ranting", has become his signature. With his band Elling brought this brand of spontaneous outburst, whose topics encompass anything from love to philosophy to the jazz scene, to the level of art. Elling coupled these "rants" with contemporary vocalese numbers (such as writing lyrics to Wayne Shorter's "Dolores" as performed by Miles Davis) and persuasive interpretations of standards, achieving solid response in Chicago.

Being a local hero in Chicago before, Elling has in two brief years become an internationally recognized and critically regarded jazz vocal artist, performing at festivals like Montreux Jazz Festival, North Sea Jazz Festival, Nice Jazz Festival, Israel Jazz Festival and many more.