

MAY 2015—ISSUE 157

YOUR FREE GUIDE TO THE NYC JAZZ SCENE

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SKONBERG**

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# BRIA SKONBERG

BY MARCIA HILLMAN

Bria Skonberg has a lot on her plate. She is a trumpeter, vocalist, arranger, songwriter, recording artist (with a pair of CDs on Random Act Records), leader of her own groups and performer with notables like trumpeter Nicholas Payton, clarinetist Anat Cohen, guitarists Bucky and John Pizzarelli and cornet player Warren Vaché. She has racked up miles on tour through Canada, the United States, Europe, China and Japan, playing clubs and major jazz festivals. In addition, she is co-producer of the annual New York Hot Jazz Festival. And this energetic and enthusiastic multi-tasker is still in her 20s!

Originally from Chilliwack, a community of about 80,000 in British Columbia and home of a large annual traditional jazz festival, the now New York City-based Skonberg grew up in a musical family. Her parents were teachers who lived on what they called a “hobby farm” where everyone played an instrument. “There was a trumpet in the house, so I learned to play that as well as taking piano lessons but I also played a lot of sports. I had a lot of different things going on and trumpet was one of those, playing in a high school band, and then while I was in high school, I got invited to the festival and I also got involved in organizational things.” Skonberg’s first professional engagement, at the age of 16, was with a big band in the community next to hers as a vocalist, doubling on trumpet. “They needed a singer and I could do both,” she comments. “So every week on weekends and every couple of months they played a gig or a dance. That was the first gig outside of school. The band from high school stayed together afterwards and that’s when I started managing—making phone calls and trying to get gigs. Another player and I co-led the band but because I had been Student Council president, I had the skills to put it together. I did the publicity and the marketing, putting together the whole package and making the phone calls. Those were wonderful lessons because I had a couple of jobs while in college, but I was working a lot playing gigs.”

Skonberg attended college at Capilano University in Vancouver, earning a Bachelor’s degree in Jazz Instrumental Performances. They also had a course in the business side of music, things like learning to write up a contract. “There are so many things going on on that side that you always have to adapt to changes. There are many musicians who have had to learn about the business—for example, people like Quincy Jones, who worked through all of the different sides, and musicians who have gone from careers as artists to careers in management. Actually I love it when you have an agent or a manager who was a musician because they get it. They know what you need. That’s kind of my role with the Hot Jazz Festival. I sort of came on board to make sure the artists are taken care of,” she explains. She chuckles when she remembers “it was kind of a joke about the gig triangle. You could have good music, good company or good money but you could only have two out of three at a time. When I

worked with my band, I tried to hit all three as much as possible.”

Working out of Vancouver after graduation, she decided to move to New York City in the fall of 2010. “I had already been touring regularly for five years, so Vancouver was more of a hub. I realized I needed to be challenged and wanted to be more uncomfortable,” she recounts. “New York City has the reputation of being the most challenging, so I went to the mecca. I had come East several times before to play and knew quite a few musicians. Thanks to some incredible friends I already had here, the setup was easier than most and I was able to hit the ground running.” And Skonberg has been running and busy ever since. Successful at doing her own booking, Skonberg has seen a change this year. “This is the first year I’ve had an agent,” she states. “JWP Agency is booking me and it’s awesome. Booking is all about the personal connections and the agent already has them. I’ve found someone I can trust, so it’s been fantastic so far.”

The next item on Skonberg’s plate is her work at the third annual New York Hot Jazz Festival. The Festival runs from 12 noon to 2 am at The Players and features music on three different stages. The lineup on the Ballroom and Library Stages includes Andy Farber, Wycliffe Gordon, Skonberg, Evan Christopher, Nicki Parrott and the ‘usual’ cast of many others. The Piano Room is dedicated to ragtime, stride and jazz age songbook pianists with Bill Charlap, Jon Weber, Terry Waldo, Conal Fowkes, Chris Pattishall and Pete Sokolow. There will also be a Festival jam session and after party. “The festival is going to be awesome,” Skonberg enthuses. “Over three short years, it has grown exponentially in its interest. And it always was meant to be a celebration of the hot jazz community. Traditional jazz has come back into the forefront because of its likeability. It’s the way it’s fun to play. It’s happy music and very accessible to a general audience. And maybe with everything that’s been going on in the world, people are ready to have some fun. The festival is basically a party. It’s a celebration of the community that plays this kind of music and it also draws in people that haven’t heard this kind of music. This year it’s branching out to be more of a hot jazz plus Swing—the Swing that was going on in the ‘30s and the ‘40s.”

What comes after this on Skonberg’s agenda? “The next thing I am going to announce this month,” she reveals, “is that we’re starting a jazz camp in May of 2016. It will be for adults first [16 and 17 and up for liability reasons] and it will cover such things like ensemble polyphony between the horns and the way the rhythm section swings together, how to play things together and how to lead in a combo setting. Vocalist Molly Ryan and I have gotten our heads together and this year we will do a Kickstarter campaign to raise some initial capital.” And there’s always more playing and singing and making happy music for this energetic and talented lady. ❖

For more information, visit [briaskonberg.com](http://briaskonberg.com). Skonberg curates and performs at the New York Hot Jazz Fest at The Players May 3rd and is also at Birdland May 6th and 27th with David Ostwald and Drom May 23rd with Colleen Clark. See Calendar and Regular Engagements.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Bria Skonberg – *Fresh* (Lighter Than Air, 2008)
- Wycliffe Gordon – *Hello Pops* (Blues Back, 2011)
- Bria Skonberg – *So Is The Day* (Random Act, 2012)
- Morganville Four – *Alone With My Dream* (Jazz Rules, 2012)
- Colleen Clark – *Introducing* (s/r, 2013)
- Bria Skonberg – *Into Your Own* (Random Act, 2014)

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