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Former Roanoker Rene Marie delivers glittering vocal show

By [Tad Dickens](#)
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Before Rene Marie began her performance Friday night at Jefferson Center, Roanoke Mayor David Bowers handed her a key to the city.

For the next 75 minutes, Marie showed why she deserved it.

The former Roanoker turned international jazz performer and her backing trio made that time fly by as if it were an instant, with sizzling grooves, blues- and gospel-tinged jazz and soul music, and Marie's shimmering, sliding vocal work.

Marie, now based in Fredericksburg, slipped the key around her neck and told the crowd, "I have only one thing to say." And that was a lengthy, a cappella, wordless country-tribal chant that she developed with subtlety, her voice dipping into the lower part of her register and leaping high.

Then it was time for her band to get involved. Drummer Quentin Baxter, stirring up the snare head with brushes, and new bassist Kevin Hamilton locked in as Marie sang the title cut from her new CD, "Black Lace Freudian Slip."

Her lyrics were irreverent — "I drink imported wine right out of the bottle" — and her improvisation was slyly gorgeous. She even cooked up some complementary lines as pianist Kevin Bales sought out and nailed some darker colors in his solo.

Marie called on 16-year-old James Morgan. She had met James and his family in 2009, during a pre-concert performance at Total Action Against Poverty's Transitional Living Center, then invited them to sing with her at Jefferson Center. Since then, James has been a student at the Music Lab at Jefferson Center.

Marie yielded the stage to the young man, who did a nice job on a jazz-pop number called "Unwanted Conversation."

"That's great," Marie told the crowd. "I'm so proud of him."

Next, Marie's son Michael Croan joined the band. Croan took the lead on "Deep In the Mountains," a haunting, gospel-inflected number from "Black Lace Freudian Slip," which alluded to the evil work of lynch mobs.

The Denver, Colo.-based Croan is a fantastic singer in his own right, nailing hip phrases and taking advantage of his range in much the same way his mother does.

And their harmonies? Goodness.

Croan returned for the set's finale, a set of patriotic numbers from Marie's other 2011 album, "Voice of My Beautiful Country." But that jazzed-up medley belonged to Marie, who concluded it with the lyrics of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" superimposed over the melody of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

"Lift Every Voice and Sing" is considered by many to be the black national anthem. Marie had stirred up a controversy when she performed the mashup at Denver's 2008 State of the City address. But inside Jefferson Center's Shaftman Hall, there was no controversy, just beauty.

She returned to a cappella work for her encore, taking a request for "How Can I Keep From Singing," one of her best-loved numbers.

"My life goes on in endless song above earth's lamentations," she sang. "I hear the truth, I've got to sing it."

She walked off to a standing ovation from the 490 people in the hall, which can hold more than 900. And that was the only real disappointment of the night. A Roanoke home girl with great chops tempered by sublime taste returns home, and we can't fill the hall on a Friday night? That's a shame.

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