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## Jazz singer returns for performance at Mercyhurst

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There is a certain kind of jazz fan whose interest in the music is as much forensic as it is aesthetic. I'm old enough to be in this group, for whom the salient question is: Why isn't jazz as popular as it once was?

There are many answers to this question, and you can trace them back to the time when people stopped dancing to jazz. Mass-market popular music must move the body. But it must also move the heart and the mind, and as folk music and rock took over the moral high ground of protest from, say Billie Holiday's still searing "Strange Fruit," jazz, especially of the vocal sort, became more about display or attitude than commitment. It became a lifestyle accessory rather than the articulation of a life.

René Marie, 56, is not that kind of jazz singer. One might argue that she is not a jazz singer at all, though the malleability of her phrasing, her finely calibrated sense of time and interpretive daring place her firmly in the jazz tradition.

But her commitment to the material is more like that of the singer-songwriters that arose in the 1960s. No one who was in the Erie Art Museum Annex for Marie's first Erie concert in 2002 could forget the audience's rapt concentration. When she returned for the 2003 Erie Art Museum Blues and Jazz Festival, perhaps 10,000 people at Frontier Park were equally captivated and silent. This is hard to do and magical to witness.

She sang mostly covers on those occasions, pretty much the default strategy for jazz singers throughout history. But Marie, who came to singing late in life (see related story, Page 31), doesn't follow a familiar script.

For one thing, she writes her own music, which is second-nature for singer-songwriters and blues artists, but rare for jazz singers. All but three of the 13 songs on her fascinating new CD, "Black Lace Freudian Slip," are originals, but there's no routine in them.

For one thing, they span a wide stylistic range from the galloping Brazilian partido alto rhythm powering "Rufast Daliarg" to the wry, weary blues of the setbreaker "Tired" to the louche, lights-are-low torchiness of "Gosh, Look At the Time," to Marie's setting of the Serenity Prayer.

Like the luminaries of the Great American Songbook, Marie pays careful attention to words. She doesn't use confession as a substitute for craft. Above all, she invests these songs with a ferocious commitment to emotional truth, the kind of commitment that can have a crowd of thousands hanging on every word and every note.