

Olatuja transcends the Spotlight

Emerging vocalist Alicia Olatuja and her quintet brought her distinct multi-genre music to Kansas City for the first time last Friday night, as this year's Spotlight Artist on the Folly Jazz Series.



St. Louis-native Alicia Olatuja first earned national recognition as a member of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, with a mere 60-second solo during President Barack Obama's 2013 Inauguration Day. Since then, Olatuja's reputation as a singer of sophistication and depth has been steadily on the rise. Her classical training at the Manhattan School permeates the distinct blend of jazz, world music, and pop styles found on her 2014 solo debut album, *Timeless*, which was featured heavily during Friday night's Folly concert.

The quintet presented a thoughtful mix of eleven original tunes and covers during its two-hour, two-set show. Olatuja's originals especially stood out, highlighting the enduring themes of human nature, relationships, integrity, and character that inspired her *Timeless* project. "The One" began the performance, recalling classic 70s soul but with a surprising and memorable off-kilter beat. With the emotional and personal piano-voice duet "Transform," which would fit in comfortably with musical theatre rep, we get a glimpse into Olatuja's songwriting process. She has given herself a challenging melody here with many wide intervallic leaps, all executed with flawless intonation and sustain.

"Truth in Blue" opened the second half, with its haunting introduction and undulating bass line doubled above by Olatuja's voice. "Truth in Blue" showcased her vocal range best of all. My favorite song of the night, though, was "Speak the Words," a gently sassy, self-affirming reassurance against backhanded compliments. "Speak the Words" prominently featured bassist Ben Williams, a member of Pat Metheny's band (with which he won a Grammy) and winner of the prestigious Thelonious Monk International Bass Competition. As Olatuja displayed her firm grasp of harmony and lyricism, Williams laid down a funky, playful groove and enjoyed a well-formed, stylistic, and engaging solo. Two Portuguese songs, "Serrado" and "Esperanza," were included on the set list. The former closed out the first half, during which Olatuja utilized unexpected patterns and arpeggios. The latter began with a percussive, rhythmic repeated vocal phrase which led to both English and Portuguese lyrics. The voices of Olatuja and her guest vocalist, Rasul A-Salaam, were well matched—complementary in both technique and timbre. Chaka Khan's "Love Me Still" and Michael Jackson's "Human Nature" were given Olatuja's expressive interpretations, her silky, supple mezzo-soprano perfect for both songs, appealing to jazz and pop sensibilities alike. Later in the program, Olatuja presented fresh arrangements of the classic ballad "Over the Rainbow" and hymn "Amazing Grace." After a delicate introduction by

pianist Jon Cowherd, Olatuja's voice, tender and moving, filled the Folly to the backmost row, utterly transfixing the audience. There was no encore, but elaborating on "Amazing Grace" for almost ten minutes served the purpose. During this delightful extended take, Olatuja sang a second round of band member introductions—she could make any mundane text sound sweet by singing it. A-Salaam belted out an edifying, show-stopping solo, and drummer John Davis delivered his only substantial solo of the night, though his measured support was evident throughout. The modest Folly audience on Friday night was privileged to become acquainted with Alicia Olatuja. As her artistic profile rises, she is absolutely sure to broaden listeners' horizons with her diverse, genre-bridging music. I wouldn't be surprised to see Olatuja return to the Folly Jazz Series after this introductory appearance as its Spotlight Artist.

REVIEW:

Folly Jazz Series

Alicia Olatuja Quintet

Friday, March 11, 2016

Folly Theater

300 W. 12th St., Kansas City, MO

For more information, visit www.follytheater.org

[Top Photo: Alicia Olatuja](#)