

Multi-Talented Gunhild Carling Thrills Syracuse Jazz Fest Audience

by Russ Tarby

Like the aurora borealis, Swedish swinger Gunhild Carling lit up the night sky over Syracuse's Clinton Square on June 28, 2024. She sang, she danced, she played tailgate trombone, wooden recorder, a tin penny whistle, and three—count 'em—three trumpets all at the same time.

Clad in a royal blue fringed miniskirt with matching scarf complemented by sparkling blue high-heel shoes, the 49-year-old jazzwoman opened with an original composition, the title tune from her newest album, *Jazz Is My Lifestyle*.

She really seemed to cut loose musically on a French tune titled "Song for Trombone."

True to the titular 'bone, Carling's instrumental chops were as colorful as her outfit. Her tone may not be immaculate, but she leans toward a swampy, Southern style full of suggestive slurs, guttural riffs, plenty of world-wise whining and the occasional caterwaul.

Decked out in several radiant strands of white pearls around her neck, Gunhild also sported four rows of pearls as a bracelet on her left wrist. Her fingers flashed glossy red nail polish, a wedding band and a skull ring. A faux white orchid sat atop the right side of her blonde locks.

Gunhild Carling was born in Gothenburg, Sweden, into an especially musical family. While she started on drums, she made her recording debut as a trombonist at the age of nine. Before long, she had mastered the trumpet, recorder, harmonica, and bagpipes, became a tap dancer, developed as a singer and learned to play the banjo, ukulele and harp.

After carving out her career in Europe, in 2018 she moved to Northern California with her family while she continues to tour the world.

That endless roadwork means that occasionally she'll find herself onstage being accompanied by musicians of varied abilities. Not to worry in Syracuse, N.Y.

Nearby major colleges there such as Syracuse University, Ithaca College, SUNY Potsdam's Crane School of Music, Cornell University, and Rochester's Eastman School of Music have been producing top-notch reading and improvising musicians for decades.

On June 28, a 16-piece big band assembled by Jazz Fest founder Frank Malfitano and trumpeter Jeff Stockham rose to the occasion as Gunhild Carling did her many things.

While pianist Luke Carlos O'Reilly served as Gunhild's music director and conductor, most of the musicians hailed from Syracuse. Joe Carello and Seth Carper played alto saxes, Mike



The gifted multi-instrumentalist Gunhild Carling played three trumpets simultaneously as part of her main stage set Friday, June 28, 2024, at the Syracuse International Jazz Festival in Upstate New York. (Courtesy syracusejazzfest.com)

Dubaniewicz and Mike Titlebaum played tenors and Frank Grosso blew a baritone sax. Trombones included Mark Anderson, Melissa Gardiner, Greg McCrae, and Joe Vanable.

The trumpet section featured Pat Carney, Jeff Stockham, Rob Robson, and Lee Turner.

Guitarist Bob Sneider came over from Rochester, while two New York City musicians completed the rhythm section, bassist David Finck, and drummer Clint DeGanon.

Prior to Gunhild's set, the same big band accompanied Freda Payne and while they ably supported the 81-year-old Detroit-based pop singer, that performance paled in comparison to Gunhild Carling's electrifying set which followed. Gunhild showmanship really seemed to galvanize Stockham and company.

After "Song for Trombone," she took "Just a Closer Walk with Thee." Gunhild's piercing vocal softened by her sweet Swedish accent, gave that hallowed old spiritual new life. Her tough trombone outro was capped off by a brief but stunning duet with clarinetist Mike Dubaniewicz.

Next she sang "The Lady Is a Tramp" embellished with a slide whistle, before blowing a blues harmonica on "Blues in G." The band grooved almost effortlessly on "Your Smile Makes a Difference to My Life," and a newer original ballad, "I Desire You." The singer's yearning was courageously expressed by a scat vocal climaxing in falsetto.

Next she unveiled another of her own russtarby@netscape.net

compositions, "Shaking the Bangkok," an upbeat tune spotlighting her trumpet work augmented by an informal tap dance. Reedman Dubaniewicz, trumpeter Jeff Stockham, and trombonist Melissa Gardiner were all spotlighted with some hot leads.

And she brought Mike Dubaniewicz back to play some tenor sax on "Cosmic Drive," before doing something most of us had never before seen nor heard.

She put three trumpets to her lips and played a convincing few bars of a "Blues in B-flat." Her tone was solid gold times three.

The surprises didn't stop there. She sang an all-German version of "Mack the Knife," and jazzed it up on her recorder. She switched to medieval Swedish bagpipes for "Bag Pipe Blues." Unlike the more familiar Scottish Highland bagpipes, the Scandinavian instrument produces a higher-pitched, less droning sound.

While proving her versatility, Gunhild's enthusiastic show clearly had swing and New Orleans jazz as its foundation. Besides being a supremely gifted performer, Gunhild Carling is also an accomplished composer and arranger.

We'll hear more of her compositions and arrangements this fall because in August she released 11 originals on her new disc, *Jazz Is My Lifestyle*. And adding yet another instrument to her remarkable résumé, the record even features her playing a theremin!