Drawn to jazz, Jebry makes songs her own

BY ROBIN DEMATTIA Florida Weekly Correspondent



Judy Branch grew up in Los Angeles with Cher as a best friend. At age 20, she was hired by trumpet player Harry James and began touring the world as a singer with his band. Throughout her career, she has performed with Wes Montgomery, Kenny Drew Jr. and Lionel Hampton, among others.

Now performing under the name Jebry (a nickname her father created from her full name, Judith Eleanore Branch), she lives in Naples and has steady weekly gigs around town. This week, the Jebry and Friends Quintet performs from 2-4 p.m. Sunday, March 18, as part of the Bayshore Cultural and Performing Arts Center’s “Jazz in the Park” series at Sugden Regional Park. The show will include modern jazz, Dixieland and some Broadway tunes. Admission is free, but parking is $5.

Jebry’s goal is not just to sing, but also to entertain.

“People don’t want to just stare at the singer, they want to feel they are part of the group,” she says. “So I joke around a lot. I hand the microphone around for people to sing. They clap and dance. They have fun.”

She grew up in a musical family, with a mother who played several instruments and a father who was a drummer and singer. The house was filled with jazz music from Ella Fitzgerald, Mel Torme and Frank Sinatra.

Jebry’s father owned several restaurants that catered to movie stars and record moguls. He paid for Jebry to record a demo, which he gave to an agent. That person connected her with trumpeter Mr. James, who taught her the ropes.

Eventually, Jebry formed her own band, which included Bobby McFerrin on piano. She spent 20 years on the road, performing at jazz clubs and theaters throughout Europe, Asia, Greenland, Iceland and Canada. She was in Berlin the day the wall came down, and the band took its instruments outside to play “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

Back to Los Angeles in 1984, Jebry was approached by a friend from Southwest Florida who said the Old Marco Lodge in Goodland needed a singer for two weeks. They invited her to stay for season, and she’s been here for almost 26 years. 3 Points Mentioned

 She has had a successful career despite not receiving any formal training, except for some vocal lessons from jazz pianist Harry Fields. She doesn’t even play a musical instrument.

But she’s always been drawn to jazz.

“I like to take a melody and work within the chord structure to improvise and make it my own,” she says. “The songs that came out of that era to me are the finest songs ever written, with great melodies and great lyric content.”

The audiences who come out to hear these songs grew up with the music in the 1930s and 1940s, and Jebry knows her performance brings back memories for them.

Jebry performs as Jebry’s Jazz Jam from 5-8 p.m. Mondays at the Island Pub off Neapolitan Way. From 6-9 p.m. Thursdays, she’s at the New York Pizza and Pasta House on Immokalee Road. Her seasonal gig from 5-8 p.m. Sundays at Hibiscus Golf Club ends on March 25. **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**2009 Article about Jebry**

Readers of this space have probably become familiar with the name of “Jebry,” a.k.a. Judy Branch, the ex-Harry James singer who virtually started the jazz scene in Naples years ago. Jebry is fortunate, and deservedly so, to work the same spots, year after year, so “opening nights” at new venues are rarities. The following is the story of a recent one, which will appear in the “Marco Island Eagle” newspaper. Incidentally, I’m happy to announce that I am now contributing semi-regular reviews and features for the “Naples Daily News,” including an interview with Frank SInatra, Jr. that is set to appear March 28th. You can access this fine newspaper from anywhere by logging on to NaplesNews.com. Herewith is the feature on Jebry:

**OPENING NIGHT WITH JEBRY**

Jazz singer Jebry, a.k.a. Judy Branch, the one-time Harry James Big Band singer who was among the first to bring jazz to Naples when she came here 22 years ago, doesn’t have to look for work. Work comes looking for her. The owners of a relatively new Naples restaurant, Capri: A Taste of Italy, heard about Jebry’s great band and devoted following, came out to hear the group, and hired them immediately.

Jebry doesn’t have many opening nights, in that the majority of her club work, at places like Norm’s and The Island Pub, has been ongoing for many seasons. So last Thursday at Capri: A Taste of Italy was indeed a special evening, and befitting such a singular event, Naples jazz fans and jazz players filled the place to capacity.

Long time Naples music aficionados, who have been following the singer since her appearances at The Witches Brew (a famed, Naples nightspot that was torn down about five years ago), know that an evening with Jebry is not run-of-the-mill entertainment, jazz or otherwise. Actually, “Jebry and Friends,” as it is billed, revives the lost art of the jazz jam session. There’s nothing new about the concept of a jam session, where singers and instrumentalists of all ages and styles guest, or “sit-in” as they say in the vernacular, with the rhythm section (in this case, the bassist, drummer and pianist accompanying Jebry). Jam sessions, in one form or another, have been around since the birth of jazz itself, and there have been some legendary ones throughout jazz history. One that stands out in memory, if only because it was recorded, was an early 1950s meeting of three of the greatest alto saxophonists in jazz, be-bop master Charlie “Yardbird” Parker, multi-instrumentalist/composer Benny Carter, and Duke Ellington star soloist, Johnny Hodges.

Jebry’s sessions through the years have featured just about every player and singer of quality in and around the Naples and Marco Island area, to say nothing of those horn players and vocalists visiting from New York, Philadelphia and points north, south, east and west. On an instrumental basis, just about every pianist and horn player of note in the area has either passed through Jebry’s bands, or has guested with her groups at one time or another. The late, legendary and beloved bop pianist, Kookie Norwood, was one. Others who immediately come to mind are the sublimely lyrical trumpeter Bill Papineau, who was with Jebry for years, and pianist Stu Shelton, a technically astounding artist who leads his own groups and appears often with leader and trumpeter Bob Zottola. Zottola, by the way, appears at Capri with his fine group every Monday night.

The jazz historians will decide whether the Thursday night get-together at Capri: A Taste of Italy belongs in the next book written about jazz history, but it was, without doubt, tremendously entertaining, and that’s what these things are supposed to be. As another great jazz singer, Joy Adams, is fond of saying: “That’s why they call it playing.”

Jebry’s accompanists, who also back all the guests, are as talented as any national or international “name,” past and present. Pianist Jean Packard, a superb player who knows just about every song ever written, and in any key, has for years been a favorite of famed mainstreamers like Al Cohn, Zoot Sims, Ruby Braff and Harry Allen. Bassist Richard Lytton is a great swinger with a wonderful ear, whose inventive solos are always a joy to hear. Drummer Bobby Phillips, Jebry’s husband, can–and does–play in any style, with great taste, and with unparalleled technique. No drummer is better at backing up Jebry.

As a vocalist, the star herself is surprisingly versatile, and really transcends categorization as a “jazz” or any other type of singer. She shouts the blues with the best of them and her country singing is as authentic as any singer on the country charts. Obviously, she shines at jazz, with influences that range from Ella Fitzgerald to Anita O’Day. What makes every night with Jebry so special is her generosity with the stage and with the spotlight. That is, of course, what makes a jam session.

And among the great jammers in attendance and on the stage last week were singers Betsy Guy (who always shines in her duets with Jebry), the Billy Eckstine-like stylings of Frank Michota (one fine drummer as well), the always-from the heart singing of Al Reddington, and my colleague of long-standing — which is why I can describe her as “astounding”– Joy Adams. Joining the group instrumentally though the night were that master of traditional jazz, cornetist Dick Cashman, master trumpet bopster Marty Krebs, clarinetist and saxophonist Karl Zihtilla (whose clarinet work startingly echoed that of the clarinet giant Buddy DeFranco), Naples’ pianistic answer to Dave Brubeck, Mel Rosen; and even yours truly, who got in some hot licks on drums and vocals.

It was quite an event, quite a night, quite an opening, and quite a jam session. Right now, the powers-that-be at Capri: A Taste of Italy have wisely booked Jebry and the group every Thursday for the foreseeable future. It’s easy to see why. As for next Thursday? Who knows what jazz star might show up?

Jebry and Friends perform at Capri: A Taste of Italy, every Thursday from 6 to 9 p.m. The restaurant is located in the Riverchase Plaza shopping center at the corner of Immokalee Rd. and Route 41. Call 239-594-3500 for information. **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**'Medical miracle' Jebry still singing in Naples, thanks to fans, doctors, and a great attitude**



Jebry performs at Mongello's Restaurant in East Naples on Monday Oct. 29, 2012. *By Nori St. Paul*

Judith Elenore Branch, better known to her many fans and friends as the vivacious jazz singer "Jebry," has a side to her that much of the public doesn't know.

Jebry, a native of Hollywood, Calif., who transplanted to Naples 26 years ago, is a medical miracle. That's what her doctors say. She's had enough operations to support entire hospitals; one medical ailment after another since 1966.

And she's still singing. In her upbeat demeanor, Jebry shares an amazing medical journey and the secret to how she copes and overcomes the hurdles of her health conditions. Some have actually brought her close to death's door, beginning in 1966 with a ruptured appendix that demanded quick surgery to save her life. The latest was two months ago, when Jebry was diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumor.

It is the latest in a litany of health threats she has beaten back. Jebry's ruptured appendix scare in 1966 was followed in '69 by surgery for throat nodules that almost cost her singing career.

Breast cancer struck the singer in 1985, but she persevered.

In 1996, she said, she learned she had lung cancer, which she also successfully battled. The following year, she had a total hysterectomy.

Then, in 2006, she suffered breast cancer a second time, this time undergoing a mastectomy. Her maternal grandmother had died of breast cancer in 1966 at age 68. "My grandmother was too ashamed to tell anyone she had a lump in her breast. That's why I tell women, get your mammogram. And I tell everyone, listen to your body. If you don't feel right, it is trying to tell you something. Go get checked out," she declares.

It was a hot and humid Florida afternoon on Aug. 25, while Jebry was baking a pie at her home in the Kings Lake area of Naples, enjoying time off-stage with her longtime partner, band mate and husband of six years, Bobby Phillips. Jebry recalls that while standing in their kitchen, she started to feel nauseated and wobbly. "I told Bobby I just wanted to lie down for a bit," she says. "But he took one look at me and he said 'no way'." As the pretty, blonde woman reflects back to that day, she flashes a smile and her hazel eyes shine, belying the story that follows.

"So Bobby took me straight to the hospital," she says, adding with a laugh, "He knows me pretty well."

Naples neurologist Mark Gerber, M.D., announced Jebry's latest diagnosis to her and Bobby; anaplastic oligodendroglioma. It is a malignant, but extremely, brain tumor, sensitive to treatment with both chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Gerber told the stunned couple that he's only known of two cases.

Two days later, on Aug. 27, Jebry had brain surgery to remove the tumor that doctors say had formed on her brain likely over the course of years. Recovering from surgery, she still wasn't out of the woods, and the journey for her prognosis started, and so that doctors could determine her future treatment, they sent her tests and films to the top brain and cancer specialists at Massachusetts General, Harvard, San Francisco and the Anderson Cancer Institute.

"My brain is traveling everywhere," she jokes. Still, she doesn't show an ounce of fear, even in the face of this latest medical challenge.

Jebry, born into a musical family, began acting as a young girl, and had aspirations to be an actress. Her father thought college was a better idea. Jebry says she only lasted a year in college before hitting the road in 1966, when she joined Harry James' band and began traveling the world. She was 21 at the time, and began to develop what she is known for today, her "leather and lace" jazz singing voice.

And her positive attitude. "Attitude is everything," says Jebry. "Humor is the best medicine in the world," she continues. "If I became negative, I would have died by now. I'm a tough old broad," she adds with a twinkle in her eyes, even while she waited final results on her tumor last week. Based on her medical history, she's not kidding about her attitude saving her — along with good doctors, she adds.

Jebry says that through it all, her husband, her fans and her friends, especially from her Monday night sessions at Mongello's restaurant in East Naples, have helped her maintain. She couldn't do it without their love and support. And her faith: "I pray, and I believe God watches out for me." "No matter what the news is, face it," she says. "And continue to live the life you were given — good, bad or indifferent. And always, always keep a sense of humor."

Does she ever get down? "Of course I have my bad moments, and maybe I'll cry in the shower to release that. I'm human. Once I was depressed for almost a year, but I got over it and it made me even stronger."

Jebry says she'd even like to be a motivational speaker, "so I can help others."

The future, she says, includes hopes to continue being a motivation to others through her survived experiences, and through her music. "When I am on stage, I am giving back the love I get," she says.

Jebry has sung with such legendary musicians, such as Bobby McFerrin, Wes Montgomery, Kenny Drew Jr., Lionel Hampton, and Harry James. She has traveled around the world working clubs and jazz festivals and continues to sell out concerts in Naples, where she came and first played with Bobby Gideons.

In the meantime, Jebry captivates audiences regularly in Naples, singing with her band "Jebry and Friends" which includes husband Bobby Phillips on drums, Jean Packard on piano, and Carlo Fusaro on bass Recently, while performing at Mongello's in East Naples, she made the rounds to tables, sitting with her fans and friends.

"We've known Jebry for 15 years," says one of them, Linda Beller of Farmington Hills, Mich. "She's something else, how she handles all of her challenges. And what a talent."

Dick Cashman and his wife, Joan, of Naples, have following the singer for 25 years."She is a courageous fighter," Dick Cashman. "She's to be praised for that, and she is incredibly talented." Joan Cashman called Jebry "a very strong woman. She's an inspiration to everybody."

As a postscript to this interview, Jebry received great news from her doctors. All of the tumor is gone, and for now, the singer can forego chemotherapy and radiation, and take a medication for five months to a year, while she stays under the watchful eyes of her doctors. She is cancer free.

And the show will go on.

**JEAN PACKARD and JEBRY**

Fly Me to the Moon

Published on Mar 31, 2015

JAZZ NOIR TRIO performing for guests outside LeLafayette patio in Naples, FL during Sunday Jazz Brunch. Becky Schlueter-vocals, Jean Packard- piano, Carlo Fusaro- bass

<https://youtu.be/kzrf_zGaM6o> or

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzrf\_zGaM6o&feature=youtu.be**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzrf_zGaM6o&feature=youtu.be)