

2007 Chicagoans of the year: JAZZ

Do you ever wonder how artists get their ideas?

Chicagoan of the year: Dee Alexander

Chicago jazz artist spreads her wings

By Howard Reich
[Chicago Tribune](#) arts critic

December 30, 2007

She was everywhere in 2007:

Attracting throngs to Millennium Park; swinging joyously outside the South Shore Cultural Center; pushing into experimental music at the Velvet Lounge; improvising buoyantly at the first Hyde Park Jazz Festival.

But it wasn't merely the frequency of [Dee Alexander](#)'s performances, or just the stylistic breadth of her work, that distinguished her. Perhaps more important, she sang with such interpretive depth and dramatic power as to force listeners to re-evaluate the music she makes. Though Alexander has been performing in her hometown for decades, in the past year she took on the most daring projects of her career and made them sing.

"I think this year was some kind of metamorphosis for me," says Alexander, invoking precisely the right word to articulate what happened to her, and her music, in '07.

"Chicago always has been my home, but this year I started to spread my wings."

In more ways than one. Geographically, Alexander performed outside the U.S. to critical acclaim, joining several local colleagues in a tour to Poland, organized by the non-profit Jazz Institute of Chicago.

Yet even if Alexander hadn't received robust ovations in Eastern Europe, where she immediately was invited for a return trip in '08, her increasing artistic prowess yielded several of this year's greatest jazz performances.

Consider her breakthrough moment at Millennium Park last summer, when she unveiled "Sirens of Song: Dee Alexander's Tribute to Nina Simone and Dinah Washington." Tearing into Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" -- an outcry against the racism of the South -- Alexander unleashed every bit of anger that Simone

intended, and then some. The gravel in Alexander's voice and the grit of her delivery pointed to a musician who didn't just sing a song but rejuvenated it.

The same artist, however, expressed the joyousness, optimism and technical acuity one sooner associates with Ella Fitzgerald, during a standing-room-only show at the Hyde Park Jazz Festival.

How can one artist prove so convincing in these diametrically opposed contexts, and several others?

Perhaps the long years Alexander has spent in relative obscurity has enabled her to develop her art in full, outside the glare of publicity and the artistic compromises of the music industry. Performing in low-profile venues at night and holding day jobs all the while, Alexander has been free to experiment with music and learn her own capabilities.

The influence of past Chicago masters such as Light Henry Huff, whose transcendently spiritual music she re-imagined in a South Side field house last June, informs every note she sings. But now she stands as a significant artist in her own right, carrying forth the traditions of Chicago jazz -- and building upon them.

Not surprisingly, the increasingly obvious skill of her work has meant that her schedule has picked up dramatically, with forthcoming European tours and a first recording date in the offing.

But it's the music, she says, that still moves her most.

"Sometimes it gets so overwhelming to me -- I get this feeling in my chest, and then I'm crying," says Alexander.

"When people come up to you, they're in tears, and they say, 'You've really touched my soul, you've touched my heart' -- that's the greatest accomplishment that any artist can have."

INSPIRATION

"I'm inspired by the elements -- the wind, life, love, babies, laughter. Musicians -- great musicians. Rainbows. I'm inspired by Nicole Mitchell ... I'm also inspired by the [AACM \[Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians\]](#). I'm inspired by their creed: to nurture and cultivate and perform our original music."