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Kate McGarry at Joe's Pub on Friday night.

Applying a Jazz Sensibility To Bjork and Joni Mitchell

By BEN RATLIFF

Kate McGarry is sure to annex some of her listeners from more folk- and pop-directed audiences, and they will find her familiar. Her voice can sound a little like Suzanne Vega's — breathy and accurate and straightforward and narrow — but then break into strong, qualifiably jazz singing.

Jazz singers can't let themselves be understood too slowly. They must either pass one test like crazy, or pass a dozen more than adequately. In the music's spectrum, they have the greatest potential appeal, and unlike many instrumentalists, they have pressure on them to identify directly what they're all about. They can do it through choice of material, or through instrumentation, or through tone and phrasing; Ms. McGarry signifies something concrete in each of those categories. And she's still in progress. Last year she changed her band and raised her profile from fairly low to midlevel and rising. "Mercy Streets," her new album on Palmetto, is the report, and she played the new music at Joe's Pub on Friday night.

Though she does write songs herself, at the moment she's concentrating more on interpreting others', and Friday's set included songs by Bjork ("Joga"), Joni Mitchell ("Chelsea Morning") and Peter Gabriel ("Mercy Street"). They're all well arranged, but they suggest a slightly

Kate McGarry

Joe's Pub

watery, sentimental side of her music.

Her old group's lineup — only about a year ago — included a Fender Rhodes electric piano, as well as guitar, bass and drums; with her voice added, it had a unique sound. Now the band has two guitarists, Steve Cardenas on electric and Keith Ganz (Ms. McGarry's husband) on acoustic, with Sean Smith on bass and Kenny Wollesen on drums. It's still a well-conceived band, but at times more directly suggestive of crossover jazz albums that have sold well recently, including Cassandra Wilson's and Norah Jones's; Mr. Ganz's fingerpicking on "Whatever Lola Wants," crisscrossing with Mr. Cardenas's lines, evoked a similarly stylized, noirish atmosphere.

The band is not content to stay with only one mood, though. It goes in other directions: Mr. Ganz's winding Pat Metheny-like guitar melody "Snow Picnic," with Ms. McGarry singing in unison, or the harmonically rich ballad "Stars," with music by the pianist Fred Hersch (who played it with her as a guest on Friday), or simply the traditional strategy of breaking down a standard and scatting. And this she did really well on "But Not for Me": her voice became a soloistic element in the band, displacing rhythmic accents and leaping out in front of the music.