

## Players ▶

### Catherine Russell ▶ *Upbeat Inheritance*

Like the stomping early jazz bands of New Orleans and Chicago, vocalist Catherine Russell puts big-note harmony and downstage pulse in her musical mix. "I like music that makes you want to move," she said. "If it doesn't swing somehow, I don't know where to put my voice because I sing from rhythm first."

Russell's material brings the swing-band beat, but she enhances the bounce with banjo, mandolin, resonator guitar, accordion and even tuba on her new disc, *Inside This Heart Of Mine* (World Village). Russell gets a potion of Ma Rainey's low-country romp with Dan Hicks' or Robert Crumb's cow-circuit roll.

"With bebop, nobody wanted to smile anymore," Russell said. "It was, 'We're gonna do our thing, and you can dig it or you don't have to.'"

So Russell emphasizes an earlier era.

"I decided I'm gonna have people who are audience-friendly and who love swing," she said. "If the tunes aren't fun for people, there's another tune."

On a recent night at Scullers in Boston, Russell shouted Dinah Washington's "My Man's

An Undertaker," while Matt Munisteri bent out bluesy banjo tones and Russell waved her hands from side to side. Her set included songs from Fats Waller, Sam Cooke, Willie Dixon and Besse Smith.

The singer comes to rootsy jazz through her genes. In New Orleans, her father, pianist and bandleader Luis Russell, started picking up dance hall gigs in 1919. Luis worked with King Oliver for three years, and then directed Louis Armstrong's bands during the '30s and '40s. Catherine has photos of Armstrong holding her when she was a child.

Following the advice of her mother, guitarist/bassist Carline Ray, Russell took a music degree from Santa Rosa Junior College. But her fears blocked her. One day she and Ray saw the swing musical *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, and her eyes widened. "I asked myself, 'How old am I going to need to be to just be myself?'"

To overcome her stage fright, she entered and graduated from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. Since then, she's climbed the ladder by singing backup for Paul Simon, Cindy



Lauper, David Bowie and Steely Dan.

In the past, Russell has covered songs associated with her father, including "I've Got That Thing" and "Back O Town Blues," co-written with Armstrong. On *Inside This Heart Of Mine*, she performs "Slow As Molasses," which her dad performed decades ago. She also delves into the blues on Dixon's "Spoonful."

For Russell, swing is the common denominator. "When we hit a pocket, it moves the air. I'll see toes tapping, fingers snapping and I'll think, 'Yeah, the world can work.'" —Peter Gerler