

# Suzanne Petri revisits Chicago nightlife with 'Torch, Sass and Swing!'



Suzanne Petri performs her "Torch, Sass and Swing!" show on Oct. 26, 2016, at Steppenwolf's 1700 Theatre. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)



**[Howard Reich](#)** **Contact Reporter**

If you were in Chicago in the 1970s, you remember the glitter and glamour of Rush Street, its clubs and showrooms lighting up the night.

The first time you visited, the place seemed unreal, so many people swarming the pavement, so much action after dark. Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Barbra Streisand, Lenny Bruce and other masters made Mister Kelly's a cultural nexus. All manner of music and dance unfolded at the Happy Medium, Jazz Showcase and other spots. Buddy Charles held court at the nearby Acorn on Oak, dispensing tunes and wisdom for anyone in need of song or solace.

Not surprisingly, Chicago singer Suzanne Petri was dazzled by it all when she first visited here from Minnesota.

"They didn't have anything like this in Minneapolis," she says in a show that lovingly celebrates what once was, "Torch, Sass and Swing!"

Had Petri done nothing more than deliver music of that era Wednesday night at Steppenwolf's 1700 Theatre, she would have created a worthy attraction. But she's joined by eminent actor Robert Breuler, her husband, who serves as ebullient narrator, telling the tale of a time and place well worth celebrating.

True, Breuler needs to get a bit more familiar with the script, and Petri indulges in a vibrato a tad too wide and generous.

But the fervor of Petri's delivery, the color of Breuler's reading and the atmospheric jazz accompaniment of pianist Bobby Schiff and bassist Jim Cox conjure an era.

The music, of course, tells the story best, Petri delivering jazz and cabaret standards with all the grit and gumption for which she's known and justly admired. She doesn't just sing songs — she tears into them. Like Julie Wilson, an obvious influence, Petri makes the most of every syllable, finding drama where lesser interpreters encounter only sounds.

Petri opened her show with fireworks: three Cole Porter classics bound up with the legacy of Ella Fitzgerald. Neither "Anything Goes" nor "Just One of Those Things" nor "From This Moment On" appears on Fitzgerald's "Live at Mister Kelly's" double album, but they're at the core of the landmark "Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Cole Porter Song Book" recording and thus aptly launched Petri's show.

No one can match Fitzgerald's sensuousness of voice or brilliance of technique, but Petri didn't try to. Instead she brought surging rhythmic energy to this music, and a degree of conviction that it deserves but does not always receive.

Everyone associates Rodgers and Hart's "The Lady Is A Tramp" with another Rush Street habitue, Frank Sinatra, but Fitzgerald sang it on her "Mister Kelly's" album and Petri revived it, complete with Fitzgerald's added lyrics. Layers of musical cliché have gathered around the song in the ensuing decades, but Petri stripped them away. Every word meant something in her reading, nothing was tossed off.

Petri opened her homage to Julie Wilson with "Cry Me a River," Petri's slowly rolling tempo, throaty low notes and craggy phrases turning the tune into something of a dirge. It takes a brave singer to close a song with the rasp that Petri produced.

And yet with the next piece, Porter's "Always True to You in My Fashion," Petri sounded light and bright and whimsical, as if she'd flipped a switch vocally.

Petri overplayed her hand in "Long John Blues," a bawdy romp performed as an homage to Bette Midler, its vivid lyrics rendering Petri's torso gyrations unnecessary. But her rendition of Hoagy Carmichael's "Skylark" brought out meanings one never thought of, and her duets with guest singer Greta Pope offered an appealing study in contrasts, Pope's silken vocals the antithesis of Petri's rough-and-raw cries.

The show felt a bit long, but better too much of a good thing than too little.

*Howard Reich is a Tribune critic.*

**When:** 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday

**Where:** Steppenwolf's 1700 Theatre, 1700 N. Halsted St.

**Tickets:** \$20; 312-335-1650 or [www.steppenwolf.org](http://www.steppenwolf.org)