

Erinn Brown raises voice at Capt.'s
By Will Pirone/ Salem Sounds
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Erinn Brown first came to Salem a decade ago when her group, "Hunter's Moon," played at the old Rockmore Drydock restaurant on Pickering Wharf. After frequent engagements and a live album by the group recorded at that location, she decided to settle here.

Brown came to Massachusetts from West Virginia after her first year of college, hoping to attend the Berklee School of Music. She was soon accepted and graduated with a degree in professional music, with a performance and song-writing concentration.

Like many musicians, Brown came from a musical family, and cannot remember when she wasn't singing. Her mother says that she sang on the way home from the hospital.

As a child she sang at the dinner table between bites of food. She played clarinet and saxophone in high school, and sang at local events with her two sisters.

Most area musicians have a day job and play music on weekends and in the evenings. After a few years of following this route, Brown decided to focus full-time on her musical career and, as she says, "chose the path of poverty." She now teaches piano, guitar, voice and music theory, spending her remaining time as a singer and songwriter.

Brown is a familiar figure on the local music scene. Her recently disbanded group, "Move Over," played regularly at Dodge Street. She has been a frequent open-mike host and featured performer at In A Pig's Eye. I saw her during Haunted Happenings, performing on the outdoor stage at the Essex Street Mall.

It is only appropriate that I caught up with her this weekend at Capt.'s Waterfront Grill, the site of the former Rockmore Drydock, where her musical life in Salem began. The interior has been recently and tastefully redone. The restaurant is in a beautiful setting, with views of Derby Wharf, the "Friendship" and the harbor.

This was a solo engagement. Brown accompanied herself on guitar, playing rhythm behind her vocals, and picking melodic lines during the instrumental breaks. She sometimes works with Michael Kehn on bass. If another guitarist is present, she often will play the conga drum.

But this is all about the voice as an instrument. Her voice is never trapped in her chest or throat. It is projected through her mouth and nasal cavities where complex resonance is produced. The resulting timbre is very smooth and soft in the lower register. She uses the microphone, rather than her lungs, to amplify this sometimes breathy delivery.

Her pitch is precise and even, generally ending with a slight vibrato or waiver that abruptly resolves on key. She ascends from her natural alto to her upper register with

ease. In this range she has a variety of vocal effects. Always just short of a cry, a wail, an occasional growl, and then she quickly returns to the lower register.

Her phrasing and cadence are usually steady, although at times she will let the melodic possibilities overtake the meaning of the words, breaking up the lyric in unexpected ways. She will frequently vary the vocal dynamic while syncopating the beat, then, just as abruptly, return to the main thrust of the song.

This is as close as you can get to scat and still be articulate. It is jazz masquerading as pop; the blues hiding in ballads.

During the last set on a recent evening, a member of the audience requested a song she had done in the first set. She apologized for repeating the song, then produced a completely different interpretation. She explained to me she had done this for the benefit of those who had stayed through all three sets.

Her original material is artistic in both lyrics and music. Themes of love, rejection, anticipation, and ambivalence are embellished with vivid imagery, believable detail and memorable narrative. This range of emotions allows variety in pace and tempo among the individual songs and across the performance as a whole.

She rarely uses a set list, allowing the musical flow to direct the selection of material. This sometimes leaves spaces in the set. The interpretive nature of her delivery causes the quality to vary from show to show. But then, it varies on a scale from excellent to outstanding.

The set generally consists of equal shares of original songs and covers. About half of the original material is from her CD "Road Signs to the Sun." The rest are more recent compositions for the album she is currently working on. New compositions and covers are regularly introduced and keep the act from getting stale.

As I listened to her weekend sets, I was visited by a recurring thought: Why is someone with this much talent and training playing in small rooms with local bands? Perhaps her next CD will change all that. Until then, catch her while you can.

Capt'.s Waterfront Grill & Club is at 94 Wharf Street on Pickering Wharf. For information, call 978-741-0555, or visit www.capt.s.com online. Brown's Web site is www.erinnbrown.com.