

By Andrew Gilbert

for the Mercury News

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For jazz musicians the road to Europe isn't paved with gold, but since the 1960s flying across the Atlantic has become an essential rite of remuneration for American improvisers, who would often be hard-pressed to make ends meet relying solely on stateside gigs.

The young vocalist Robin McKelle has managed the neat trick of following the well-beaten path to the Old World while shortcutting the difficult step of first gaining notoriety at home. Something of a sensation in Europe, McKelle is using the continent as a platform for conquering the United States - a campaign that includes a performance tonight at Santa Cruz's Kuumbwa Jazz Center and her South Bay debut on Sunday afternoon at the Improv, kicking off San Jose Jazz's Winter Series.

McKelle didn't pay heavy dues before finding success in France, and she had already made a strong impression on her colleagues. Conductor Keith Lockhart recruited her to sing and tour with the Boston Pops while McKelle was a student at Berklee College of Music. And Berklee hired her to teach vocals after she graduated. The small Los Angeles label Cheap Lullaby Records released her debut album "Introducing Robin McKelle" in 2006, which introduced her to Paris through licensing to a French label.

"My career in France happened almost over night," says McKelle, 33, from her home in New York City, sounding amazed at her rapid ascent. "I had some really good press, debuted at the JVC Jazz Festival, and it became this huge buzz.

"Within a year I went from 150-seat clubs to 2,000-seat theaters. I don't know why or how, but I'm thankful for it."

Listening to her two recordings, McKelle's appeal isn't very mysterious.

McKelle possesses a pleasingly throaty voice, and puts a personal stamp on even the most familiar lyric with her relaxed phrasing and buoyant rhythmic feel. On her first album, she sings standards backed by a top-shelf studio big band, with solos by tenor saxophonist Pete Christlieb, guitarist Larry Koonse and reed expert Gary Foster. It's not hard to imagine Parisian audiences enamored by an attractive young American jazz singer putting a soulful spin on songs like "Night and Day," "Come Rain or Come Shine" and "I've Got the World on a String."

Her second album, 2008's "Modern Antique," was originally released on Cheap Lullaby and then picked up by Blue Note. It's another big band session, but rather than going for a vintage feel she commissioned contemporary arrangements that match her 21st-century sensibility. In her resistance to being pigeonholed, McKelle is finishing a third album, "Mess Around," that reveals her love of soul and R&B.

She produced the album herself, and contributed four original songs and several arrangements. She sets Leonard Cohen's "Everybody Knows" to a finger-snapping R&B groove, delivers a funkified version of the Bee Gees' "I Can't See Nobody" arranged by James Brown trombonist Fred Wesley, and croons the Ray Charles lament "Lonely

Avenue.&quot;

Slated for European release on Sony in April, the album's U.S. release is still being negotiated.

&quot;I'm changing directions, going into a blues/soul/jazz vibe inspired by Etta James and Ray Charles,&quot; McKelle says. &quot;I'm definitely more into that '60s soulful sound, not smooth R&B jazz. I love Amy Winehouse and Raphael Saadiq. I have a chance to show my individuality as an artist. I think it's different from what other young jazz vocalists are doing.&quot;

The excellent musicians she's keeping company with have played a key role in shaping her new sound. In recent months, she's performed with pianist Xavier Davis, a graduate of Betty Carter's rigorous bandstand academy; the powerful bassist Reggie Washington; and drummer Mark McLean, a rising studio star who's collaborated with jazz greats like Dewey Redman and Jane Bunnett and pop figures like Gladys Knight and Billy Joel. That's the band she's touring with on her West Coast dates.

&quot;Robin is a very talented musician who's not bound to one genre or style,&quot; says Davis, who divides his time between teaching at Juilliard and recording with jazz musicians like Tom Harrell, Stefon Harris, Regina Carter and Mimi Fox. &quot;She has a unique blend of influences that she's combining to create her own sound. She is not afraid to step out there and fail.

&quot;To me that's the sign of an artist, because nothing significant happens when we linger in the 'safety zone.' &quot;

Robin McKelle

When: 2 p.m. Sunday

## Robin McKelle makes her South Bay debut this Sunday at the Improv

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Where: The Improv, 62 S. 2nd St., San Jose  
Tickets: \$30, 408-280-7475

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