Tierney Sutton '86 has cracked the Jazz Billboard Top Ten with come overnight, but it has come on her own artistic terms, her latest recording, Dancing in the Dark. Success has not which makes it all the sweeter.

BY WILLIAM L. HOLDER '75

ater class to folding chairs hastily set up at the back, Sutton and her trio emerge. She is wearing a stunning red gown and her three male band members are dressed in black, which leads her to joke that the group has worn Wesleyan colors in honor of this Connecticut appearance.

The Quinnipiac venue is not the Oak Room at the Algonquin, where she did a four-week gig last winter, or Carnegie Hall, where she will perform in February, but the mostly older crowd here is hugely enthusiastic. After the concert, they pin her down in the lobby to talk about jazz favorites. The crowd seems to bear out a claim she made earlier in the day during an interview: Many of the people who discover her music become devoted fans.

Sutton has not been an overnight success, but lately she has been getting the kind of attention that feels to her like payoff for years of hard work. Her most recent record for Telarc reached the Billboard Top Ten Jazz. She has had upwards of 100 gigs on the road this year, far more than in the past. The Los Angeles Times calls her "a remarkable talent—one who fully deserves to prosper on her own inimitable artistic terms." That's just the way she wants it: on her own terms.

When Sutton sang at the Algonquin, New York Times reviewer Stephen Holden wrote that she exemplified "the difference between a technically accomplished jazz singer strutting her stuff and a serious jazz artist, who takes the enterprise to another level.

"Throughout the performance," he added, "Ms. Sutton conveyed a sense of jazz singing as an extension of spiritual meditation in which adherence to an ideal of balance and consistency and, yes, humility took precedence over any technical or emotional grandstanding."

"He got it," Sutton says.

The Algonquin was a turning point for the band. It was the first time the foursome had been ensconced in one hotel for an extended period, and they fell into a rhythm of preparation for each night's performance. Sutton, an adherent of the Baha'i faith since high school, was fasting from morning to sunset as part of an annual Baha'i observance. Her band membersKevin Axt on bass, Ray Brinker on drums, and Christian Jacob on piano-decided to join her ritual of meditation and prayer before each performance. The result was that this already tight-knit group coalesced in ways that surprised even them.

"It was a magical time for us," Sutton says. "We were selling out the shows. But more important, we all felt that we were communicating to the audience and they were getting what we were all about. That is more spiritual than it might seem at first.

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"People in the audience would say to us: You guys are like one being when you play together."

Yet two years ago Sutton was wondering whether she should stick with her musical career. She had doubts about its importance.

She had not set out to be a musician. At Wesleyan she was completing a major in Russian studies when she fell under the spell of the late faculty member and jazz musician Bill Barron, who brought first-rate musicians from New York to campus. She sat "amazed" as she listened to Benny Green and Betty Carter in concert on campus. In the music listening room she heard the queen of the bop era, Sarah Vaughn, for the first time. She was entranced. People had told her she had singing talent during her Milwaukee high school years. Her father even offered to put her up in a New York apartment so she could pursue singing exclusively. But now, with her introduction to jazz, she had a vision and a sense of purpose.

She followed her vision first to Berklee College of Music in Boston before hitting the New England jazz circuit. In 1994, she moved to Los Angeles, where she has taught jazz singing at USC while her career has grown. She doesn't regret her years of obscurity. They allowed her to spend a lot of time with her young son and to shop at Costco like any other San Fernando Valley mother.

In 1998, she was a semifinalist in the Thelonious Monk Vocal Competition for emerging jazz singers. The following year, her CD Introducing Tierney Sutton was nominated for an Indie Award for best vocal album. Since then she has released four critically acclaimed CDs.

Critical acclaim, however, did not equate at first with significant sales. Telarc, a highly respected name in the recording business, hung on to her when, Sutton exclaims, she "was selling four copies to Wesleyan alums." Telarc's belief in her artistic merit was important to her.

Still, she wasn't sure whether she should persevere.

"I spent a lot of time debating whether being a jazz singer and making records was enough," she says. "The only satisfaction you can have is to feel that you are doing something that is of service. Otherwise, you are going down a materialist hole that won't be satisfying."

Eventually, she laid her concerns to rest with the help of fans, including a judge who wrote her that he has an intense docket filled with horrible crimes, but in his chambers he would listen to her music and be soothed.

"That's a service." Sutton thought. "It has a place in society where I can hang my hat."

In late September Sutton had returned from a tour in Spain to give four performances, all sellouts, at the Kennedy Center Jazz Club in Washington, D.C. With its soaring ceilings, red carpets, and a perch overlooking the Potomac, the Kennedy Center is a glamorous venue. The Jazz Club, though, is a more intimate space tucked away on the top floor. It's small, seating roughly 170 people gathered around round tables just large enough for drinks from the bar at the back. Dark blue drapes surround the space and absorb the dim lighting.

Sutton, wearing a black gown, opened the evening with a song from her latest CD, Dancing in the Dark. The recording was inspired by the music of Frank

Sinatra, she tells the audience, from his "crushed-heart, post-Ava-Gardner years." Sinatra may seem like an odd choice for a young female vocalist, and she confesses that she didn't bother to think about him until she started listening to his repertoire of 400-plus songs, which she calls "relentlessly good."

Sutton sings, as the Times put it, with a "light, pitchperfect voice" marked by a "pure flutelike sound that can be inflected any number of ways, from a sassy nasality to a deeper, fuller contralto." She doesn't strut across the stage; her hand and arm movements tend to be slight and controlled. Between songs she talks to the audience about her music in an easygoing, joking manner. When singing, however, she sometimes puts her hand to her temple as though she is retreating to an interior realm of pure musicality.

"For me and for everybody in the band," she says, "the music puts us in a spiritual state. There is a meditative aspect to what we do."

Their work is a communal enterprise. Sutton disdains the cult of personality. During performances, she clearly enjoys putting the microphone in her lap and listening to the riffs of her band members. She describes them with genuine affection. "My goal has always been to adjust to what they would create. I would say, 'Here's the song, here's the key, start it out any way you want.' I felt my challenge was to be with them."

Together for 11 years, she and her band work mostly with well-known standards, but they significantly reinterpret every song they have ever performed.

"I fell in love with the standards when I first started singing jazz," she says. "Having grown up on pop tunes on the radio, the melodic and harmonic complexity of a great Duke Ellington song was a revelation to me."

At the Kennedy Center she tells the audience that her favorite musical is My Fair Lady. The band performs a trio of songs from it, which are full of surprises and rhythmic complexity. As she closes the performance, the crowd responds with a rousing standing ovation and an insistent demand for an encore.

She obliges them with obvious pleasure. Her fans are the fifth member of the band, she says. She loves it when people tell her they don't normally like jazz but enjoyed her music. They are responding, she believes, to her goal of "creating something that's our own thing and is not derivative," of doing music on her own terms. **W**

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