



Amina Figarova in Concert, La Jolla, CA, Feb. 26, 2009

By [Dan McClenaghan](#)

Amina Figarova Sextet
Athenaeum Music and Arts Museum
La Jolla, California
February 26, 2009

If you can believe pianist/composer [Amina Figarova](#)--speaking to the audience after her opening tunes at the February 26, 2009 show at the Athenaeum Music and Arts Museum in La Jolla (San Diego), California--she is "...just the person who writes the notes." She credits her band with realizing her musical vision. True to an extent, but her self-effacement is reminiscent of Duke Ellington's habit of calling himself, in his band introductions, "the piano player."

Beginning with *Come Escape With Me* (Munich Records, 2005), Figarova and her band have produced three excellent CDs, culminating with her *Above the Clouds* (Munich Records, 2008), with her masterpiece, *September Suite* (Munich Records, 2005), sandwiched between.

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Figarova's--and her band's--approach always seems, on record, a compelling mix of conservatory/concert hall refinement and wee hours jazz club grit. This particular show made more of that contrast. The Athenaeum, an architecturally attractive, near-century-old library in the trendy downtown La Jolla Village, has class and refinement written all over it. But dark alleys lurk in that part of town (Raymond Chandler wrote not too far from here), and the sound this night leaned in that direction, due in part to a sense of abandon and adventure that seemed to bubble up out of the ensemble, and also--not in small part--due to the wonderful addition of tenor saxophonist Marc Mommaas to group.

Mommaas' presence seemed to push the music in an adventurous and avant direction, whether it was in a solo-trading rumble with trumpeter Ernie Hamms on "Chicago Split" or his smolderingly introspective turn on "Above the Clouds."

The band features a powerhouse drive train in drummer Chris "Buckshot" Stik and bassist Jeroen Vierdag, both of whom add a muscular, streetwise horsepower to Figarova's often elegant ideas, while flutist Bart Platteau injects a contrastingly cool, silky buoyancy to the sound.

Figarova was classically trained in her native Aberzabien but succumbed to the bite of the improvisational jazz bug. She has an Ellingtonian "band as her instrument" approach to her artistry, but like the Maestro, she is an enormously gifted, in-the-moment piano player. Her solos this night were studies in contrasts between crisp, studied succinctness and beautiful, angular, spontaneous freedom.

The gorgeous, high-energy set was highlighted by a three-tune medley from *September Suite*, Figarova's heartfelt response to the 9/11 tragedy. The horrified ranting of "Rage," the frenetically searching "Trying to Focus" and a lost and deeply melancholy "When the Lights Go Down," which showcased Figarova's deft and eloquent piano touch, were a gripping aural experience, evocative of the feelings generated on the dark day early in the century.

Figarova and her band are, on CD, a consistently exciting, top-level jazz group. They pushed things up yet another notch this evening at the Athenaeum. One can imagine the scene from the street: the walls of the gracious Spanish Renaissance-style architecture--a stone's throw from the ocean surging against the rocks in the scenic La Jolla Cove--expanding and contracting with the tidal forces of the Figarovian energy this night. But I wouldn't know. I was lucky enough to be inside, listening.

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