



*The anticipation in the air is palpable when the lights dim in the 350-seat auditorium and the hum of audience chatter dwindles until the proverbial pin drop can be heard. Backstage, hair and makeup is dubbed perfection, instruments are in tune, and everyone wishes her luck. Nicole Yarling is understandably excited, very happy, and more than a little bit nervous. She is about to face a packed house—a theater full of people who have never heard of her. They are there because they know that Manchester Craftsmen's Guild consistently delivers great music; they are there because they love Joe Williams and they trust him to bring them only the best. "Good Evening," Joe says, striding onstage. "Every now and then, you find yourself marveling at things*

*that you hear and people that you meet. I feel blessed to have met someone whose hands and voice are full of magic—absolute magic—and now I want to share her with you. I want you to meet a beautiful and gifted young lady, Miss Nicole Yarling."*

She may have been "an unknown" when Joe introduced her to the Pittsburgh audience, but they gave her a warm welcome and she delivered a show that they won't ever forget. Unknown, but not a novice. "Yarling's vocals and violin soar joyfully above an excellent rhythm section, inventively scatting and stretching syllables, speeding and slowing tempos and betraying what seems an almost instinctual creativity," wrote one reviewer.

That creativity, which emerged at an early age, has been nurtured since early childhood. Nicole's father was a big jazz fan and an amateur jazz pianist and organist, so the jazz influence got an early hold on her. Recordings of Billie Holiday, Etta Jones, Sonny Rollins, Dexter Gordon, Clifford Brown, and Miles Davis, to name just a few, could always be heard in the Brooklyn home where she was born. "Much to my surprise, I am still able to recall many of the solos I heard as a child," says Nicole.

Although steeped in the jazz tradition, she has not let it confine her. In the early 1990s, Nicole spent three years as a featured soloist with Jimmy Buffet. During her time with Buffett, she made two recordings (one went platinum), traveled throughout the U.S. and Canada performing at venues such as the Hollywood Bowl, the Greek Theater, and Madison Square Garden, and appeared on the Tonight Show. With all that experience under her belt, Nicole then led her own group, Little Nicky and the Slicks/Sandbox Romeo, on eight successful European tours.

As one jazz columnist wrote, "Every musical hat fits Nicole Yarling. For more than a decade she has been part of South Florida's musical world as a singer and violinist,

working in jazz, rock, rhythm and blues, experimental music and a few other styles that defy description."

Floridians have seen Nicole perform in a number of different contexts: playing her five-string violin and singing the songs of Harold Arlen as the featured artist for the Gold Coast Jazz Society, collaborating with poets, and even rockin' with The Weld at Mangos on Sundays. New Yorkers saw her at one of the 1998 JVC Jazz Festival concerts and she flew to the West Coast to fill a guest spot at the Los Angeles Hollywood Bowl tribute to Ella Fitzgerald. One reviewer, commenting on a comparison of Nicole and Ella, wrote "Yarling's little girl exuberance combined with a world-weary bluesiness make it an apt analogy." There are bound to be some comparisons made (perhaps to Ella, perhaps to Betty Carter), and some might find her violin stylings reminiscent of Stuff Smith, but Nicole truly has her own sound. If you ask Joe Williams, who knew and worked with them all, he'll tell you that "She sounds just like Nicole, no one else has that joyful exuberance."

Performing live at Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, Nicole puts forth a well-balanced show mixing lots of popular songs by Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, Harold Arlen and others, with two of her own originals and a few straight-ahead jazz standards by Miles Davis, Eddie Harris, and George Shearing.

*Nicole is nearing the end of the first verse of "Blame It On My Youth," she has locked eyes with the audience and they are with her. All of a sudden, the whole audience seems to collectively hold its breath. Joe is slowly emerging from the wings and they don't want to spoil his surprise for Nicole. She senses the heightened anticipation of the audience but isn't sure what is causing it, until Joe, still behind her, picks up the second verse. The audience is enchanted as their voices blend into one smooth sound. It can't get much better than this. Perhaps the only thing that can top a lovers' duet is the sheer abandon of the blues. The audience is primed and the show closes with Joe's own original composition, "Who She Do."*

— Devra Hall