

By OWEN McNALLY

Dr. Steven Sussman, a distinguished, Hartford-based physician who combines his wide passion for jazz with his deep commitment to a humanitarian cause, is prescribing extra simmer to his already sizzling annual “Jazz for Juvenile Diabetes Benefit” concert this spring by presenting the young, red-hot, rising trad jazz superstar, trumpeter, singer, songwriter, Bria Skonberg.

The phenomenal young woman with a horn leads her band at Dr. Sussman’s 21st annual swing soiree—a quality dinner concert—on Saturday, April 14, opening at 7:00 p.m. in the auditorium at West Hartford Town Hall in the heart of West Hartford Center, 50 South Main Street.

Skonberg, the latest in Canada’s long list of luxury jazz exports to the States, including such iconic figures as Oscar Peterson and Diana Krall, is increasingly becoming a media darling and frenzied fan favorite. Her cross-generational appeal, which embraces everyone from the most devout, long practicing Tradphiles to young converts to the Trad faith, has been sparked by her inspired national and international live performances and her swinging, new recordings on Sony Music Masterworks Okeh Records.

Among her alluring, infinitely far more than merely okay releases on Okeh Records is her self-titled “Bria,” celebrating her given name and her perpetual con brio style. Released in 2016, “Bria” won a coveted Canadian JUNO award for Vocal Jazz Album of the Year, and also made The Top Five in Billboard’s jazz charts.

A ruggedly individualistic, fearlessly freewheeling c stylist despite roots in the tradition she’s not easily categorized. For example, she’s been compared to a diverse list of vocalists, which includes Michael Buble (another quality Canadian export), Diana Krall, Harry Connick Jr. and even Anita O’Day. As a highly expressive instrumentalist, she can make the old sound new and the new sound old, all filtered through her own creative, fiery imagination, always sounding fresh, never ever stumbling head-first into that much dreaded pitfall, “retro.”

A rare sort of millennial, she not only embraces the ancient wisdom of Louis Armstrong as a fundamental inspiration, but also discovers boundless joy in exploring hallowed Trad grooves, finding new, forever young life there to great spirited effect. So much so that the now New York-based, peripatetic player has been igniting new interest in the too often ignored but venerable jazz genre, Trad jazz, even shedding light across the ever-widening generation gap. Somehow connecting even with a seemingly Trad-proof, younger in-crowd, thanks to her bold, trumpet inventions, smoky, evocative vocals and her steamy, adventurous, groove-oriented, versatile mix of a classic with a more modern-day pop sensibility.

Besides her mounting collection of awards and accolades—The Wall Street Journal has dubbed her one of the “most imposing musicians of her generation”—she’s played major jazz festivals from the New Orleans Jazz and the Heritage Festival to the Newport Jazz Festival. Among her more offbeat but never off-key gigs, the native of the small town of Chilliwack, British Columbia, coolly performed the “Star Spangled Banner” at the Big Apple’s Madison Square Garden to a packed house before an NHL game. A co-founder of the New York Hot Jazz Festival, this new life force in jazz, in her spare time, is an avid educator who gives

workshops and concerts for students of all ages from the very young to the very old but young at heart, always reaching across all generations both on and off the stage.

Early in the charismatic trumpeter's career—probably even before many trad sophisticates had even heard of her—the Canadian émigré's superb melodic inventions and razor keen rhythmic sense caused a sensation among the delighted loyalists gathered at a famously celebratory “Jeff and Joel's House Party.” Unintimidated, her robust talent stood out with clarion éclat even in the imposingly swift company of the veteran all-star Trad jazz contingent that had been hand-picked by the swinging shindigs' co-host, Jeff Barnhart, the internationally celebrated jazz pianist/singer/ bandleader from Mystic, CT.

Besides the nourishing, full-bodied concert, the benefit serves hors d'oeuvres, dinner, drinks and dessert catered by Russell's Global Cuisine.

Skonberg's trumpet and vocals will be backed by pianist Mathis Picard, bassist Eric Wheeler and drummer Darrian Douglas.

The atmosphere is intimate, unpretentious, convivial, even collegial for the festive gathering of kindred jazz spirits. Everybody listens intently. And there's no traditional “wall” separating musicians and the audience. You might even get to gnosh and schmooze with the musicians, or even share a drink. Hors d'oeuvres at 7:00 p.m.; Dinner at 8, with hot jazz fare served until 11. And all of this hedonistic indulgence in jazz, cuisine and camaraderie simultaneously serves a most noble purpose in supporting research to combat Juvenile Diabetes.

Tickets are \$150 per person. Proceeds benefit the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF). For tickets and information call JDRF at (860) 470-0020 or Steven Sussman at (860) 614-0770.

A longtime reporter, editor and cultural critic, Owen McNally has observed the Connecticut jazz scene since the early 1960s.

