

# Little-Known Stars Step Into the Light

By [WILL FRIEDWALD](#)



*Joel Davis*

Rebecca Kilgore plays three shows next week at Feinstein's.

Rebecca Kilgore & Harry Allen Quartet

Feinstein's at the Regency

540 Park Ave., (212) 339-4095

Monday-Wednesday

Rebecca Kilgore may just be the greatest singer you've never heard of, but you're not entirely to blame. For reasons known only to the city's booking agents, Ms. Kilgore almost never appears in New York; for her to do three shows at Feinstein's for the second July in a row is, for her, a veritable whirlwind of metrocentric activity.

Once you do hear Ms. Kilgore, however, you'll be hooked: With her opulent chops, lighter-than-air style, and, above all, her effortless rhythm, Ms. Kilgore is the living embodiment of the hippest singers of the big band era, like Maxine Sullivan, Mildred Bailey, and Helen Ward. Her partner in time for this three-night stand is saxophonist Harry Allen, a master of ballads and blues who plays so brilliantly behind singers because he essentially is one himself. Ms. Kilgore's intonation has an instrumental perfection to it, while Mr. Allen's tender tenor boasts a warmly human vocalized edge; together they should approach perfection.

One customary measure of success for a contemporary vocalist is the frequency of performances in New York. It's a skewed standard. Ms. Kilgore succeeds wildly by another, more obvious measure: She has made more records than virtually any other singer of the contemporary era. Her website lists six new albums in the last 18 months alone, of which the latest is "Yes, Indeed." The artist credit here is officially "The Rebecca Kilgore Quartet." This is probably the most finely tuned, totally together vocalist-led ensemble working today. The leader sings (and occasionally plays guitar), and the four "voices" interact on a level playing field. It's indicative of Ms. Kilgore's artistic generosity that the first "voice" we hear on the opening and title track is a trombone solo by Dan Barrett, followed by guitarist-banjoist-vocalist Eddie Erickson. This isn't a singer and three sidemen (the last being bassist Joel Forbes), but a true collective, in which Mr. Erickson also takes a few solo vocals as well (notably on "A Gal in Calico," which isn't written for a woman to sing in any event).

I've often bemoaned how contemporary jazz singers tend to overlook the blues (instead they sing too many bossa novas), but "Yes, Indeed" includes two excellent examples of Ms. Kilgore's approach to the form, which is as light and swinging and thoroughly musical as everything else she does. "Buzz Me Blues" is the Louis Jordan signature, while "There'll Be Some Changes Made" is a rather liberal adaptation of a 1921 pop standard in which Ms. Kilgore restructures the melody as a classic 12-bar blues, complete with repeating lines.

On "Yes, Indeed," Ms. Kilgore, Mr. Erickson and Mr. Barrett -- two human voices and a trombone—harmonize like a Gospel choir. Although it's tempting to compare her voice to an instrument, I don't mean to imply that she messes around with a lot of scattling or melodic distortion; she lets the melody flow sweet and clear. When she sings the minor-key French waltz (aren't they all?) "Sous Le Ciel De Paris," she gets the meaning across even to those of us who do not parlez-vous. She's also somehow clear when contradicting herself by following "I Wish I Knew" with "I Know That You Know." (Well, does she or doesn't she?)

I could spend just as much time praising any of Ms. Kilgore's other recent albums, like her Jerome Kern collection ("Sure Thing") or the two collaborative sets with jazz ukulele virtuoso Lyle Ritz. I hardly take her recordings for granted, but hearing her in person is a treat that I'm looking forward to savoring.