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MUSIC REVIEW

A Steamy Mix of Poetry, Afrocentric Themes and Love

By JON PARELES

Language dissolved into sound and fused with music in Tracie Morris's "Sonic Synthesis," which opened its three-night engagement on Thursday at the Kitchen (512 West 19th Street, Chelsea). Ms. Morris, who calls herself a performance poet, delivered her latest work with a band directed by Graham Haynes.

From the beginning — when she repeated "Ago/I go" with shifting rhythms built by her breath — she immersed herself in the band's steamy mixture of live sounds and

exotic samples. "Go, with the voice like a drum," she intoned with husky assurance.

Some of her poems were about standard Afrocentric themes: the legacy of slavery, pride in African-American survival and the glories of black culture, particularly music. Others were love poems, sensual or hardheaded. One, about love in 2010, forecast chameleonlike makeup and "strategic fat shifters" that could give lovers new curves at whim.

In another, Ms. Morris circled through phrases like "honey hush"

and "cinnamon, like swimming in sin" as the band began with edgeless, hovering chords and gradually infused the ratcheting, double-time rhythms of jungle. At times, Ms. Morris clipped and staggered her words like a hip-hop disc jockey toying with a sound bite.

Mr. Haynes was credited as the composer, with "musical designs" (including many samples and textures) by Melvin Gibbs. The musicians onstage included Marvin Sewell and Vernon Reid on guitars, Henry Schroy on electric bass, Val Jeanty manipulating samples and

drumbeats and Mr. Haynes playing cornet and controlling additional electronic sounds. They could be earthy, dipping into the blues for a Southern travelogue or building on a hard-rock riff.

But more often the band conjured the shadowy netherworlds of electronica so that even Ms. Morris's more familiar ideas took on new shades of mystery.

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