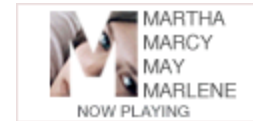


The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, please [click here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#) »



October 6, 2002

MUSIC

MUSIC; Fresh Voices And a Way With Words

By BARRY SINGER

THE Brooklyn Academy of Music will present its Next Wave of Song series next weekend, celebrating, for the second year, what it calls "innovative, contemporary singer-songwriters." Ben Folds, Stephin Merritt and Marc Anthony Thompson are this year's featured performers.

What makes them so innovative?

For one thing, all are droll, polished lyricists. In an age of slovenly rhyme and sloppy meter, this counts as a greater innovation than one might suspect.

Take Mr. Merritt. His 1999 CD, "69 Love Songs," was a tour de force of deadpan pop ventriloquism. In 69 love songs, he offered an encyclopedia of pop songwriting styles, most centered on rock 'n' roll's post-Elvis era but a few dating to Irving Berlin and Cole Porter. What united all these disparate voices was Mr. Merritt's pose of jaded romanticism à la Lou Reed, David Bowie, Brian Ferry and Cole Porter. What the album revealed, above all, was his craftsmanship.

"When you have an idea for a song, it's more difficult to write the second verse," he said in a recent interview. "That's what I learned. Once you've established a rhyme scheme based on the original idea, it's very hard to match that idea in a second verse."

All three of these songwriters -- all in their 30's -- are consumed with the sound of pop songs from earlier periods. It's a fascination that would seem to be the antithesis of innovation, but it isn't, at least not entirely. Through contemporary recording technology and a perspective both ironic and respectful, each manages to re-render the past.

The effort might seem self-conscious, but Mr. Folds disputes that notion. "I was always happy to listen, but I never played other people's music myself," he said. "I don't analyze much."

Mr. Folds released his first solo CD, "Rockin' the Suburbs," last fall after selling millions of albums with his former band, the Ben Folds Five. He continues to be a piano-pounding 70's-style bard of the banal in American culture, an everyman of the mall. "I've just always

made up songs," he said. "I don't think I would have ever started playing if it wasn't to hear what I had in my head."

Mr. Thompson is the most overt in his efforts to be innovative. Fronting a music collective called Chocolate Genius, he has recorded his flamboyantly confessional, soul-pop-acid rock blend on two warmly received CD's, "Black Music" (1998) and "Godmusic" (2001). "I'm glad to be looked at as a songwriter rather than as an entertainer or just the quirky guy," Mr. Thompson said. "I like people who are pretty meticulous about this."

Inclusion in the cutting-edge Next Wave Festival would seem to be heady stuff for any singer-songwriter. On Friday and Saturday night, these three will perform back to back to back. Mr. Merritt remains blasé. "It's just another gig," he said. "I still have to figure out a set list."

Mr. Thompson is anything but blasé. "This is a little songwriter battle," he said. "Like when you go into a club and there's another band onstage. You want to blow them out of there. You can't help it."

Mr. Folds just shrugs. "I don't know much about the series," he said. "It sounds important, though; it sounds cool. I tell my friends and they go, 'Whoa!' I like playing crummy bars and places like this too because I'm equally out of place in both of them."

Next Wave of Song

Ben Folds, Stephin Merritt and Marc Anthony Thompson.

BAM Opera House, Friday and Saturday, 7:30 p.m.

Photos: The singer-songwriters, from top, Ben Folds, Marc Anthony Thompson and Stephin Merritt: droll, polished lyrics in an age of sloppy rhyme. (Rahav Segev [top], Angelika Grundier [middle], Jack Vartoogian)