

From Broadway to Bonnaroo

American Songbook showcases adventurous music in new series in the Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse.

By Barry Singer



Marco Paguia and Lindsay Mendez

IT HAS BEEN NEARLY EIGHT YEARS since a Lincoln Center *American Songbook* concert has taken place in the Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse. After expanding the series in 2002 from its inaugural venue, Alice Tully Hall, into the intimate Kaplan Penthouse to better explore the experimental direction *American Songbook* was taking, the series producers in 2005 chose the visually splendid Allen Room at Jazz at Lincoln Center as the perfect venue for *Songbook's* expanding audience.

Now, in a welcome homecoming, *American Songbook* is returning to the Kaplan

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Meow Meow (left); Crisin Milioti

Penthouse once again to showcase more venturesome fare, stretching the 2013 season into April, following two months of stellar programming at The Allen Room. “Over the years, we’ve been very successful at The Allen Room,” acknowledges Jon Nakagawa, one half of *Songbook’s* producing team, along with Charles Cermele. “We also feel that with our success, we’ve again gotten a little safe.” Cermele agrees, adding simply, “We want to be more adventurous.”

Songbook’s edgier extended season commences on March 29 with one of the Broadway musical theater community’s more exotic tandems, vocalist Lindsay Mendez and pianist Marco Pagua. The duo—Mendez was recently seen in the Broadway revival of *Godspell* and the Off-Broadway production of *Dogfight*, and Pagua was a music director for Broadway’s multi-Tony Award-winning *Peter and the Starcatcher*—combine to create one fearlessly revisionist lounge act. Together they tackle, with a tart jazz spin, unexpected, even unlikely, standards from the pop-rock song canon, careering from Jimi Hendrix to Joni Mitchell, to Peter Gabriel and, of course, The Beatles.

No one seems better suited to exploit the *intime* promise of the Kaplan Penthouse than Meow Meow, whose multilingual performance art summons the spirit of Sally Bowles by way of David Bowie, with a dollop of Phyllis Diller thrown in. It is a dizzying, unpredictable mix, and the Kaplan Penthouse will no doubt be transformed by Meow Meow, rather than the other way around, when cabaret’s Gaga-esque diva commands the stage on March 30.

Dialing the temperature of the room down to a warm, lustrous simmer, Tony nominee Crisin Milioti makes her solo concert debut on April 5, taking a night off from Broadway’s Tony Award-winning Best Musical of 2012, *Once*, to bring her wide, brimming eyes and



Ben Sollee

exquisitely delicate musicality to the Penthouse.

Green Sneakers is not a band, but rather a song cycle written by the singularly gifted opera and musical theater composer Ricky Ian Gordon about the death of his partner, Jeffrey Grossi, from AIDS in the 1990s. The presentation on April 6 of this through-composed piece for lone male voice, piano and string quartet is a first for the series and a thoughtful bit of counter-programming that will highlight the Kaplan Penthouse's hushed attributes as, what Cermele terms, "a more contemplative space."

Nothing ornaments the *American Songbook* series more perfectly than when it showcases new, young songwriters. Kait Kerrigan and Brian Lowdermilk are, as lyricist and composer, respectively, a rising team, still laboring way off Broadway, but with an inexorable upward trajectory. Their appearance at the Kaplan Penthouse on April 19 (accompanied by a crew of Broadway's more intriguing young performers) will spotlight music that infuses the dramatic conventions of Broadway tradition with the confessional mold of contemporary folk rock, yielding theater songs that are bright and beautiful.

Ben Sollee closes out *American Songbook* this year at the Kaplan Penthouse on

INFORMATION

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Brian Lowdermilk and Kait Kerrigan



JENNY WOODWARD

April 20. Who is Ben Sollee? “Ben Sollee is a cellist and a songwriter and he travels the country with his cello doing interesting, quirky concerts,” replies Nakagawa. Sollee is 29 years old and a bit of an underground phenomenon, a native Kentuckian whose music—an explosively charged, richly syncopated mix of bluegrass, classical and R&B—has been championed extensively by NPR and toured to the Bonnaroo Festival and this year’s Newport Folk Festival.

What an aptly up-to-the-minute ending for Lincoln Center’s *American Songbook* season in 2013. This ever-evolving series continues to maintain its cutting edge by plucking great American popular music from absolutely everywhere.

Ricky Ian Gordon



DUNCAN HANNAH

Barry Singer has written many books about the arts and has been a regular contributor to The New York Times, The New Yorker and Opera News, among others. His latest book, CHURCHILL STYLE: The Art of Being Winston Churchill has just been published by Abrams.