

# American Songbook

The perennially diverse series returns with plenty to offer.

Patty Loveless



RUSS HARRINGTON

By Barry Singer

*"LISTEN TO THE MUSIC"* IS NOT what it used to be. Nowadays the phrase defaults to the digital, with iPods the governing force and iTunes the organizing principle. Lost in the iMix is the unequaled joy of discovering or rediscovering music that you love by hearing it, not through earbuds, but made live in front of you.

That's one big reason why Lincoln Center's American Songbook series exists: to remind us that listening to music is not just about hardware. Yes, Lincoln Center's other constituent entities also play plenty of live music. But when you're talking about a living, breathing

Lizz Wright



stand-in for all those listening devices—an anti-iPod—Lincoln Center's American Songbook series stands out.

This is largely because American song itself is such an all-embracing genre; a playlist-buster perennially set on shuffle. Just look at the range of artists who have played American Songbook during its first decade—from Broadway standard bearers like Betty Buckley and Brian Stokes Mitchell, to eclectic originals like Nellie McKay and Sufjan Stevens; from the Fountains of Wayne and They Might Be Giants to Stephin Merritt with The Magnetic Fields; from country divas like Rosanne Cash, to sui generis divas like Patti Smith, to actual opera divas like Deborah Voigt, and beyond.

Especially telling is the previously uncharted song territory that many of these artists explore in their Songbook appearances: Ms. Cash essaying Lerner & Loewe's "Wouldn't It Be Lovely" from *My Fair Lady*; Ms. Smith tackling "Star Dust", "My Funny Valentine", "Autumn Leaves", and "I'll Be Seeing You"; Ms. Buckley singing Mary Chapin Carpenter's "Come On Come On" and Lisa Loeb's "Falling in Love"; Ms. Voigt wrapping her pipes around Mary Poppins' "Just a Spoonful of Sugar."

The 2009 season, *American Songbook's* 11th, promises to perpetuate and extend this venturesome tradition. For 17 nights, from January 14 to March 6, the breadth of American songwriting will be on display—the gamut of pop, folk, cabaret, R&B, country, rock and roll, bluegrass, musical theater, and a whole lot in between.

"The mandate that we have is not to be like any other series in town," says producer Jon Nakagawa.

"We do have some parameters that help," adds his associate, co-producer Charles Cermele. "This is a lyric-based series, so we look for songwriting that tells stories through lyrics. Each style of music tells stories in its own way but there is a shared thread. And each season Jon and I try to find that thread; the same stories told through

#### INFORMATION

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## American Songbook

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his various "superstars" (and some non-superstars) shot between 1964 and 1966. The films will be projected above the onstage musicians as they play these scores by Wareham and Phillips, who first began collaborating in 1999 in the band Luna and later performed together as Dean & Britta.

February brings further revelatory juxtapositions. SOUL DEEP: An Anthology of Black Music will deliver a guided tour of African-American music's contribution to the American songbook as showcased by some fine singers, including Tony winners Phylicia Rashad (*A Raisin in the Sun*), Adriane Lennox (*Doubt*), Chuck Cooper (*The Life*), and Naomi Shelton and the Gospel Queens, among others.

Del McCoury and his band return bluegrass music to the series with an appearance by "the Tony Bennett of bluegrass," who played with Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Boys in the 1960s, won a Grammy in 2006, and today collaborates with alt rock groups like Phish and other fresh-faced contemporary music pups.

Singer and songwriter Lizz Wright follows in February, adding her smoky, vibrantly expressive vocal instrument and earthy creative spirit to the month-long mix. In her wake, a pair of diametrically opposite Broadway babies and one big-time Broadway songwriter will take the Songbook stage in separate solo turns. First up, the deliciously desolute, whimsically depraved Alan Cumming, a Tony winner for his indelible portrayal of the MC in *Cabaret*—here, incredibly enough, making his own cabaret debut. Next comes the scrumptuously wholesome Sutton Foster, Broadway's reigning ingénue, a Tony winner in her Broadway debut as *Thoroughly Modern Millie* incarnate. Finally, Alan Menken, probably the most successful musical composer of his generation with his

Disney film scores like *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid*, as well as their Broadway theatrical spinoffs, will serve up his own, distinguished, personal songbook.

Sandwiched amongst this disparate February crowd is the wild card of the bunch, one of the hottest unknown music makers around at the moment, the wildly precocious Nico Muhly, who has made a cult name for himself arranging and conducting recordings for Bjork, as well as Phillip Glass and Rufus Wainwright, among others, while writing classical pieces for the Juilliard Orchestra, American Ballet Theater and the Boston Pops. For American Songbook, Muhly will be collaborating with Thomas Bartlett (AKA "Doveman"), alt-folk/country artist Sam Amidon and designer/illustrator Moira Kalman.

Closing out the 11th Songbook season will be guitarist/vocalist John Pizzarelli and his wife, vocalist Jessica Molaskey, saluting composer Richard Rodgers, "With A Song In My Heart," followed by the artist long known as Stew performing at Alice Tully Hall as part of the "Alice Tully Opening Nights Festival" on March 6, alongside his longtime collaborator Heidi Rodewald, with whom Stew created such a stir this past Broadway season in their Tony-nominated musical, *Passing Strange*.

Of course, it's essential to remember that this astonishment of American song cannot be found on any iPod. To hear it, you must haul yourself down to Alice Tully Hall for Stew, or, for everyone else, to the gorgeous Allen Room at Frederick P. Rose Hall, with its stunning, windowed, real-time vistas of Central Park South and Columbus Circle.

Barry Singer writes frequently about the arts.

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