

American Songbook 2011

By **Barry Singer**



RAPHAEL NEAL

Shara Worden

FROM ITS ALLEN ROOM HOME HIGH ABOVE NEW YORK CITY, Lincoln Center's American Songbook series commands a panoramic view of music in America. Disparate styles and genres come into focus against the sweeping Central Park backdrop. All corners of this country's musical landscape seem to merge at the junction of Broadway and Columbus Circle.

It's an intoxicating spot, for audiences and performers alike. The new 2011 season

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promises to be a typically heady affair. Jon Nakagawa and Charles Cermele have seen to that. As Director and Producer, respectively, of Contemporary Programming at Lincoln Center, they jointly put the Songbook season together.

"We look for artists who are inspired by the unique nature of our venue and our series and channel that inspiration into creating an event," says Cermele. Adds Nakagawa, "The Allen Room is a place where the music and the performances become the center of attention."

Opening the season on January 12 is the high priestess of the classic American Songbook, 82-year-old Barbara Cook, whose vocal brilliance is a veritable beacon, illuminating everyone and everything around her

The Low Anthem are next up, an indie-folk collective out of Rhode Island, whose elegiac, Leonard Cohen-ish laments, often performed on period instruments, are infused with the feeling of a medieval music ensemble. Their self-released 2008 album, *Oh My God, Charlie Darwin*, was picked up for re-release by Nonesuch Records last year, leading to wider-ranging recognition and now a spot in The Allen Room.

Lance Horne is another matter altogether. A composer, an arranger, and a musical director in the Broadway/American popular standard mold that Barbara Cook embodies, Horne is an iconoclastic new voice in each of those roles and a rising star. "He's just at that perfect place for us to grab him," says Cermele. "He's become so visible working on so many different projects in so many parts of the world. He's a highly respected musical director for performers like Alan Cumming, Cheyenne Jackson, Lea Delaria, and Meow Meow. He has a debut album coming out. The number of people who've signed on to join him here is so long and distinguished, we can't even list them all yet."

Country music icon Mary Chapin Carpenter needs no introduction. Her presence in The Allen Room, following Horne in January, is a coup for American Songbook. "It's rare for her to play a room this small," says Cermele. "She's going to perform new material as well as her canon in a very fresh way."

The presence of maestro Rob Fisher on the Songbook bill is another touchstone, as resonant as the presence of Barbara Cook. Fisher this season plans to mine the musical riches of the Gershwin brothers in a show he calls *Fascinatin' Rhythm*, with special attention paid to New York City as their muse. As always, many marvelous special guests are expected.

Following Rob Fisher come a trio of contemporary originals, beginning with Shara Worden, a singular voice in the wilds of indie rock. Worden will be performing her own songs, though she has increasingly gained attention as a guest artist vocalizing alongside, among others, David Byrne, The

Stephanie Blythe





Herb Alpert and Lani Hall

Decemberists, and Sufjan Stevens. The self-proclaimed “granddaughter of an Epiphone-playing traveling evangelist, and the daughter of a national accordion champion,” she shares an affinity with other alt-rock music makers for evocative sounds and odd vintage instruments.

A punk rock legend, John Doe is living proof that there is an after-punk-life in American music. Still based on the West Coast, where he founded and led the seminal Los Angeles punk band X, he has pursued for many years now a rich, roots-rock-centered solo career. His January visit will be a rare opportunity for New York devotees to reconnect with this true pioneer.

Closing out January are the Carolina Chocolate Drops, preservers of a black string band tradition that conjures the ages of minstrelsy, the plantation and, of course, slavery, they attack the dark echoes buried in this music with such sincerity and virtuosic good humor that listeners are transported to a place beyond race and history, to a soundscape that is simply, soulfully: America.

February will bring a welcome warm breeze of bossa nova with Bebel Gilberto. The name alone is all anyone needs to know. As the daughter of João Gilberto and Miúcha she is bossa nova royalty. As an innovator and vocalist, she is a torchbearer of this music in her own right.

Gilberto gives way to blue-eyed soul in the person of Joan Osborne, the breathtaking soul singer and songwriter who is creating a song cycle entitled *Love and Hate* just for the occasion. “It involves a small chamber ensemble, possibly some dancers, and maybe even film,” notes Cermele. “We just adore Joan Osborne. She’s game for anything.”

February next features three young Broadway musical stars, all making their Lincoln Center solo concert debuts. Anika Noni Rose is first. Having won a Tony Award in Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori's *Caroline, or Change* and acclaim for her performance in the film version of *Dreamgirls*, she is already a very established talent. To have that talent displayed on the intimate stage of The Allen Room will be something to savor.

Multiple Tony nominee Raúl Esparza so regularly disappears into whatever role he has chosen to inhabit, the fact that he has a life of his own is easy to overlook. Esparza will share the Cuban-American essence of that life via the Cuban music he grew up with in his Florida childhood.

Finally, Kate Baldwin, a lovely, fresh infusion to the venerable Broadway ingénue tradition, brings her lush soprano voice and infectious presence to The Allen Room, following her Tony-nominated performance in last season's revival of *Finian's Rainbow*.

Between these stellar Broadway regulars, mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe and singer/songwriter Alexi Murdoch are sandwiched in gloriously unlikely proximity; the diva and the indie dude. Blythe may be, in terms of pure artistry, the Metropolitan Opera's reigning diva just now. It was Blythe's own idea to put together an evening devoted to the great Kate Smith for her Songbook debut; not an impersonation of any kind but an homage to this singular interpreter of the Great American Songbook.

In Blythe's wake comes Murdoch, another phenom of the self-produced indie CD set, a Nick Drake-influenced singer/songwriter whose career trajectory is a model of its type—from a demo played on KCRW in Los Angeles, to iTunes, Amazon, and the T.V. soundtracks of *The OC* and *Gray's Anatomy*. Murdoch represents, at its best, the new American Songbook delivered to new audiences in new ways.

For a finale, the 2011 Songbook season will look back to an artist who crossed so many boundaries of American popular music beginning almost 50 years ago, creating his own unparalleled niche: trumpeter and vocalist Herb Alpert, who will appear with his wife of 30 years, former Brasil '66 singer, Lani Hall. It will be the first Sunday night performance in series history. "We tried to get them last year," explains Nakagawa. "Their schedule is incredibly full. "We don't do Sunday shows here," adds Cermele. "But this one is just for them." ♦

INFORMATION

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