



Valerie Simpson

MAURIZIO BACCI

# An Adventurous Season for *American Songbook*

By Barry Singer

AFTER FOURTEEN SEASONS OF ACCLAIMED ECLECTICISM showcasing the richness of American popular music—most on one of the loveliest stages in New York City, The Allen Room, with its shimmering, backdrop of Central Park—Lincoln Center's *American Songbook* series expands its musical vistas in 2013 to include a second room with a spectacular view, the Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse.

This is both a return and an expansion. "Over the years, we've been very successful at The Allen Room," says Jon Nakagawa, one half of *Songbook's* production team alongside his booking partner, Charles Cermele. "We also feel that with our success, we've gotten a little safe."

Cermele agrees it's time to shake things up. "We want to go back to taking risks. So we're going back to the Kaplan Penthouse, where we presented more adventurous fare during the early years of *American Songbook*, while maintaining our full schedule in The Allen Room."

The first installment of the newly expanded season commences on January 30 with an opening Allen Room concert by Lea Salonga, the silvery-voiced Tony Award winner. She became a star at the age of 20 as the Vietnamese bar girl Kim, the humane heart of the original 1991 Broadway production of *Miss Saigon*. Ms. Salonga is now a mature artist, yet her voice retains its childlike luster. Valerie Simpson arrives on January 31, offering a follow-up to the stirring concert she delivered this past summer at Lincoln Center *Out of Doors* com-

## American Songbook

RICHARD TERMINE



Karen Akers

KOBIE VAN RENSBURG



Stephanie Blythe

memorating the one-year anniversary of the passing of her longtime songwriting and singing partner, her husband, Nick Ashford. The following night, Simpson's funk will give way to cabaret chanteuse Karen Akers' refinement. Cabaret singers come in many flavors these days but few represent classic cabaret style with more polished, yet penetrating, panache than the mesmerizing Ms. Akers.

Songbook's first week closes out on February 2 with Cécile McLorin Salvant, perhaps the most riveting new voice in jazz. Winner of the 2010 Thelonious Monk Jazz Competition, the 23-year-old, Florida-born singer was schooled in France, where she first garnered attention for her profoundly earthy sense of jazz classicism. Her concerts are both boldly theatrical and compellingly swinging occasions.

No *Songbook* season would be complete without a salute to Broadway by conductor Rob Fisher. On February 6, with "Ring Them Bells!," Fisher will celebrate John Kander and Fred Ebb, leading a stellar cast, slated to include Kander and Ebb veterans Joel Grey and Chita Rivera.

Bonnie "Prince" Billy (better known to his parents as Will Oldham) brings his lovingly dissipated sense of American folk rock to The Allen Room on February 7, oozing echoes of San Francisco's Summer of Love and Buffalo Springfield. To best comprehend the breadth of *American Songbook's* musical scope, one only needs to consider the juxtaposition of Bonnie "Prince" Billy with Stephanie Blythe. Blythe, the Metropolitan Opera star,

returns on February 9 to reprise her *Songbook* triumph of last season: "We'll Meet Again—The Songs of Kate Smith," Blythe's patriotic tribute to the big-voiced lady who turned "God Bless America" into her own personal anthem.

The presence of Sondre Lerche leading off the third week of *American Songbook* on February 13 reminds us that American pop music is also world music. The Norwegian singer-songwriter first conquered Scandinavia and then the rest of Europe before moving to Williamsburg, Brooklyn a few years ago and becoming a full-fledged American indie rocker. His Beatles-inspired, *Revolver*-esque songwriting and recording style is harmoniously off-kilter and terrifically engaging.

Countering the fresh with the classic, *Songbook* will turn to Mavis Staples on February 14, the Grand Dame of the Staples family, who will shower her Allen Room audience with the unyielding gospel spirit of soul music, Staples style.

The hugely talented Broadway star Kristin Chenoweth returns to *American Songbook*. As a performer, the Tony Award-winning singer and actress leads and—to paraphrase Thomas Paine—everyone else just gets out of the way. On February 15, in The Allen Room, Ms. Chenoweth will deliver an evening of unadulterated Kristin Chenoweth.

*Songbook's* third week concludes with the political activist and balladeer Tom Morello,

## American Songbook

ERIC RAY DAVIDSON



Sondre Lerche

PAMELA LITTKY



Ingrid Michaelson

best known for his guitar work in the band Rage Against the Machine. On February 16, Morello will perform with his own acoustic act, The Nightwatchman, whose politicized Woody Guthrie/Bob Dylan influences are uncompromising.

*Songbook's* final week at The Allen Room kicks off on February 27 with Kathy Mattea, the multi-Grammy Award-winning country singer and bluegrass instrumentalist, whose roots run deep into the soil of American folk music. Mattea will bring an authentic dose of Southern comfort to *Songbook's* Upper West Side precincts before yielding on February 28 to the Southern Gothic sensibility of *Lost in the Trees*—music that might best be described as baroque alt-rock. If the very notion sounds like an oxymoron, welcome to the wall of sound conjured by *Lost in the Trees'* composer/leader Ari Picker, whose lavish musical vision floats somewhere between Neil Young flannel and *Carmina Burana*.

In a tidy segue, perhaps Broadway's equivalent to *Lost in the Trees'* jangling mysticism arrives on March 1 with the songs of composer Tom Kitt and lyricist Brian Yorkey. The duo's blisteringly original score for *Next to Normal*, their very unconventional Broadway musical about bipolar disorder, not only won the team a Tony Award in 2010 but the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Their *Songbook* evening will feature the lauded original stars of *Next to Normal*, Alice Ripley and Brian d'Arcy James.

The Allen Room portion of the series concludes on March 2 with an appearance by singer/songwriter Ingrid

Michaelson, network television's favorite indie popster, who has composed music for *The Vampire Diaries*, *Scrubs*, *Grey's Anatomy* and many more. "She's a local girl made good—so talented, so successful and really overdue for a visit," says *Songbook's* Cermele.

In recent years, that would wrap it up for *American Songbook*, whose season traditionally ended the first week of March. In 2013, however, the party moves to the Kaplan Penthouse with six concerts from March 2 to April 20. The concerts will feature adventurous programming and innovative artists ranging from award-winning Off-Broadway composers and performers to alt-cabaret singers, from an engrossing song-cycle by Ricky Ian Gordon to emerging singer-songwriters/instrumentalist working in many musical genres.

Stay tuned.

### INFORMATION

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