

American Songbook at Seventeen

By Barry Singer



American Songbook in The Appel Room last season

Returning for its 17th season, Lincoln Center's *American Songbook* continues to redefine American song by embracing an ever-widening range of songwriters, contemporary styles, and musical traditions. Featuring 25 events, the 2016 series opens with concerts by celebrated artists in the dazzling Appel Room in January and February and moves to the intimate Kaplan Penthouse to showcase rising stars in March and April. For the third season, thanks to underwriting from Prudential Investment Management, the series will host an online competition to choose artists to be presented in free concerts at the David Rubenstein Atrium.

The Appel Room performances open on January 20 with the ravishing Vanessa Williams. Broadway star and versatile music artist, Ms. Williams has always navigated a standard knowingly, while also knowing her way around the R&B landscape of more recent American pop music. She gave a triumphant performance last season in the New York Philharmonic's concert production of *Show Boat*, which aired on PBS in October.

Tribute concerts are always special occasions, and few tribute subjects are cooler than Peggy Lee, the quintessence of classic songbook chic, as a singer and



Gilles Toucas

Vanessa Williams

songwriter. Hosted by her biographer, James Gavin, and featuring vocalists Jane Monheit, Nellie McKay, and other special guests, “Is That All There Is? Remembering Peggy Lee,” on January 21, promises to be as sultry and as savvy as Ms. Lee was herself.

Loudon Wainwright III comes to The Appel Room on January 22. Husband to the late, inspired folk singer, Kate McGarrigle, and father to the singer-songwriters Rufus, Martha, and Lucy Wainwright, he is a veteran singer-songwriter in the self-effacing (often self-mocking) strain of America’s best folk-music tradition and a highly literate, wryly whimsical teller of tales.

What would the *American Songbook* series be without a living legend or two? First up in 2016 will be the divine Rita Moreno on January 23. *West Side Story*’s Oscar-winning Anita for all time, a Tony Award winner for *The Ritz*, an Emmy, and a Grammy Award winner too, at 84 years old she remains a wonder. She was a member of the 2015 “class” of artists selected for the Kennedy Center Honors.

If the apoplectic comedian Lewis Black were a rock ‘n’ roll band, singer-songwriter Craig Finn could be his frontman. In Finn’s own groups, The Hold Steady and Lifter Puller, and now as a solo, he has channeled and transmuted Lew Black–like outrage into always compelling and often electrifying music. Finn brings his rants and rave-ups to The Appel Room on February 3.

Multitalented Todd Almond scored a double knockout last year with his musical adaptation of *The Odyssey* for the Public Theater’s Public Works series at the Delacorte Theater and his demi-rock opera *Kansas City Choir Boy*, at HERE Arts Center. For his February 4 *Songbook* evening, Almond is joined by special guest Courtney Love, his co-star in *Kansas City Choir Boy*.

Since her explosive breakout as a teenage singer-songwriter in the 1960s and ‘70s with her generation defining hits, “Society’s Child” and “At Seventeen,” Janis Ian has continued to forge a distinctive path in her musical and personal life. The Grammy Award–winning, iconic folk artist, whose songs have been covered by Roberta Flack,



Courtesy: Bennett Management

Loudon Wainwright III

Bette Midler, Amy Grant, and many others, raises her own voice on February 5.

Real-life entertainment-biz power couple Jerry Dixon and Mario Cantone bring their duo act to *American Songbook* on February 6. The actor, singer, songwriter, and director and actor-comedian, respectively, perform together in an evening of music and mayhem that extends and enriches their previous stage collaboration, Cantone's Tony-nominated one-man show *Laugh Whore*, which Dixon directed.

Foreigner is one of the most successful rock 'n' roll bands of all time. The Broadway hit musical *Rock of Ages* rode to glory recently, in part, on Foreigner's hits back catalogue. On February 17, Foreigner founder Mick Jones brings his latest version of the band to The Appel Room for an all acoustic, unplugged set.

Based on a Horton Foote play, *A Coffin in Egypt* is a one-act chamber opera written by the prolific composer Ricky Ian Gordon for the acclaimed mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade. On February 18, "Flicka" brings Gordon's luminously-melodic creation to The Appel Room for an intimate in-concert encore.

"There's a brave new world that's raging inside me," sings Laura Jane Grace in a track from her 2014 album, *Transgender Dysphoria Blues*. The lead singer-songwriter-guitarist for Against Me!, the punk rock band that she founded over 15 years ago, makes her *American Songbook* debut on February 19 in an all-acoustic, solo appearance, channeling the Sex Pistols by way of Cole Porter, while exploring her transgender experience.

Broadway still has some very hot couples. Andy Karl and Orfeh are certainly among them, best known for their chemistry in the musical *Legally Blonde*, which brought Orfeh a Tony nomination. Karl received his own Tony nominations for his work in *Rocky* and last season's revival of *On the Twentieth Century*. The pair will hit The Appel Room stage together on February 20. Sparks are assured.

Rhiannon Giddens may be the most important female singer in America right now. Her singing (and her playing on multiple instruments) with the band that she co-founded and still leads, The Carolina Chocolate Drops, has revived a tradition of long-obscured African-American folk music going back two centuries. Her

Humberto Howard



Austin Hargrave

Michael Weinrob



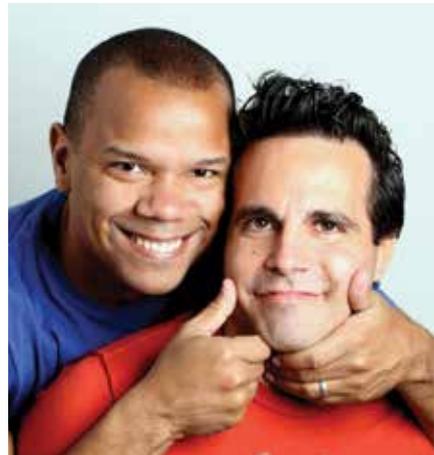
David Rodgers



Lloyd Baggs



Peter Lau



Clockwise from upper left: La Santa Cecilia, Rita Moreno, Charles Busch, Jerry Dixon and Mario Cantone, Janis Ian, Rhiannon Giddens



Foreigner

extraordinary voice is classically trained. Her ideas about American music are her own. On February 24, in an all-new show, with cellist-vocalist Leyla McCalla and folk musician Bhi Bhiman, Giddens will explore America's molten heritage of protest music.

Los Angeles band La Santa Cecilia (named for the patron saint of music) synthesizes cumbia, bossa nova, rumba, bolero, tango, jazz, rock, klezmer, and just about anything else that strikes its all-American fancy. Grammy winners in 2014 for Best Latin Rock Album, La Santa Cecilia comes to *American Songbook* on February 25.

Actor, playwright, screenwriter (*Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife*), and drag legend, Charles Busch debuts a brand new show created especially for *American Songbook* on February 26. In "The Lady at the Mic," joined by longtime musical director Tom Judson, Busch pays tribute through song and personal reminiscence to five extraordinary and much-missed women: Elaine Stritch, Polly Bergen, Mary Cleere Haran, Julie Wilson, and Joan Rivers.

Drummer Terri Lyne Carrington closes out *American Songbook's* 2016 Appel Room

residency on February 27, convening many of the singers and musicians who created her celebrated recent studio album *The Mosaic Project: Love and Soul*, an all-star, all-female jazz tribute to R&B and soul. Look for Valerie Simpson and Oleta Adams to ignite the vocal fireworks.

Barry Singer currently writes about the arts, literature, and Winston Churchill for the Huffington Post.

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