

# Diva Delight



*Chita Rivera*

LAURA MARIE DUNCAN

**By Barry Singer**

**DIVA IS AN OPERATIC WORD.** In the everyman enterprise that was American popular music during the last century, divas seemingly had no place at all. Not that there weren't plenty of diva-caliber "songbirds" trilling American popular songs throughout the course of the 20th century. It's just that no one thought to call them divas.

In our own age of hype, of course, that has all changed. Who isn't a diva in today's American pop scene? Divas in the 21st century simply are not what they used to be.

Still, the diva title very much fits a select handful of singular female singers in a variety of pop idioms. To our good fortune, the coming season



at Lincoln Center's American Songbook series positively glitters with them.

Marianne Faithfull, Rebecca Luker, Martha Plimpton, Suzanne Vega, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Nellie McKay, Leslie Uggams, Jeanine Tesori, and Chita Rivera are divas all, but of a uniquely embracing variety that shatters narrow definitions. Is there thematic significance to their group presence at Lincoln Center this season? Not really, according to series Director, Jon Nakagawa, and Producer, Charles Cermele, respectively.

"It's kind of a fluke," acknowledges Nakagawa.

"They just happen to be the performers we invited this season," adds Cermele. "Lots of great women really wasn't a choice; it has no intrinsic meaning. Many of these ladies we've wanted here for some time. That they all arrived at once is just our luck."

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Indeed. Certainly the season will be balanced by a number of marvelous male performers too: David Hidalgo and Louie Perez of Los Lobos, singer-songwriter Todd Snider, composers Gabriel Kahane and Michael Friedman. Numerically, however, the divas dominate, commencing in January with Marianne Faithfull, grand dame of rock and roll anomie, who long ago transcended her curiosity value as the former schoolgirl muse of Mick Jagger and Keith Richards to become a spellbinding performer in her own right, the voice of soulful nihilism.

If Faithfull can be said to have a polar opposite as a performer, that opposite would look and sound a lot like Rebecca Luker, Broadway's quintessential blonde ingénue. Luker's peaches and cream vocal presence and persona, however, belie a deceptive steel-magnolia spirit that makes her a fine Faithfull counterpoint.

The ladies next give way to the lads of Los Lobos, Hidalgo and Perez, who will explore their more than four decades of writing and performing some of the best songs in Latin roots-rock. "There will be more talking than usual at this concert," laughs Jon Nakagawa. "As always, we

*St. Vincent*



ANNABEL MEHRAN

CRAIG SCHWARTZ



Michael Friedman

continue to celebrate lyric-based storytelling above all else,” Charles Cermele elaborates. “So David and Louis will be telling stories about how they write their songs.”

American Songbook’s first week concludes with a newly minted diva, the award-winning stage and screen actress Martha Plimpton, whose emergence as a musical theater presence in the recent revival of *Pal Joey* was a revelation to many, including Msrs. Nakagawa and Cermele. “We invited Martha after seeing her in *Pal Joey*, and were delighted and somewhat surprised to have her accept knowing her busy schedule,” concedes Nakagawa. “What she is making her evening about,” adds Cermele, “is her longstanding sense of herself as an outsider, using that perception as a springboard for an exploration of race. She’s calling the evening *A Woman of Color*. It promises to be very provocative.”

Week Two carries through this outsider-as-provocateur motif with a very unusual program devised by the maverick producer Hal Willner, titled:

**INFORMATION**

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"I Gotta Right to Sing the Blues?" an evening of music and readings taken from the new David Lehman book, *A Fine Romance: Jewish Songwriters, American Songs*. Rufus Wainwright, Bill Frisell, and Van Dyke Parks are among the illustrious artists scheduled to appear.

Willner's extravaganza will give way to another certified diva, this time of the folk music variety, Suzanne Vega. The bard of a certain slice of New York City best described as coffee shop counter society, she has matured into an extraordinarily vivid musical observer. On Vega's heels comes arch indie rocker Annie Clark in her St Vincent mode, a diva in disguise essentially, scraping away at folk rock surfaces to expose the jangling nerves beneath.

American Songbook Week Two closes out with musical theater composer/lyricist Michael Friedman, whose work with his downtown theater troupe, The Civilians, has injected contemporary musical theater with a sorely needed dose of the contemporary, inspired quite clearly by the sound and spirit of the late Jonathan Larson.

Delicious diva tributes are the touchstone in February for American Songbook, with the great jazz singer Dee Dee Bridgewater delivering her own very personal love letter to Billie Holiday, followed by Nellie McKay in an intriguing paean to Doris Day that McKay calls "Normal as Blueberry Pie." Watch out.

A coup for American Songbook will be the presence in February of Dirty Projectors, perhaps the grooviest indie rock band in town just now. Will Björk reappear with Dave Longstreth's Brooklyn-based ensemble, as she did this past summer in a benefit concert downtown? Who can say?

A diva undimmed by time, the extraordinary Leslie Uggams will deliver a retrospective of career highlights extending from her teen years on television's *Sing Along with Mitch* through *Hallelujah*,

*Baby!* on Broadway, right up to this moment.

March will then bring a mix of guys and dolls to close out American Songbook's 2010 season. First up will be Gabriel Kahane, a singer, pianist, and composer of enormous ingenuity, author of what is without question the most intriguing new music piece in recent memory, *Craigslustlieder*, derived entirely from actual postings on the eponymous web site.

In an inspired juxtaposition of literate musical acuity versus seeming-illiterate musical acuity, Kahane will be followed by Todd Snider, the slyly irreverent young folk singer/songwriter. Were Bob Dylan to turn up today as a 21st century slacker, hazily fired up to protest the wrongs of all-American society circa 2010, he probably would sound more than a little bit like Todd Snider.

American Songbook's final two evenings will be fittingly reserved for two present day divas of the American musical theater. The first is a composer, the terrifically eclectic Jeanine Tesori, performing music from her scores for *Caroline, or Change*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, and *Shrek the Musical*, among others. The second, Songbook's closing diva, is a Broadway stage legend, the incomparable Chita Rivera.

"We've actually asked Chita to look at her career from a personal Latina point of view," notes Jon Nakagawa. "We love the fact that we have Tesori and Rivera this season but in a way we like even better that we have Los Lobos and Rivera. *That* juxtaposition—so far as Charles and I are concerned—is what Lincoln Center's American Songbook is all about."