

American Songbook in the Penthouse

By Barry Singer



Kevin Yasarola

The Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse at Lincoln Center

Low-down dives have always held a special spot in the listening heart of American popular song. Still, you can't argue with a beautiful room. The Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse at Lincoln Center is its own reward, a beautiful, intimate, 225-seat music room that perfectly complements the larger Appel Room, (at Jazz at Lincoln Center) where the first part of the *American Songbook* season is currently taking place. Starting March 16, it will be the Penthouse's turn to host Part 2 of *Songbook* with six concerts running through April 1. Now in its fourth season, the Kaplan

Penthouse series presents an eclectic mix of rising stars, new discoveries, and established artists exploring new directions and special programs. There's music beautiful enough for even the funkier dive.

"We can be more adventurous in the Penthouse," observes Charles Cermele, Producer of Contemporary Programming at Lincoln Center and the man responsible, alongside Contemporary Programming Director, Jon Nakagawa, for putting the *Songbook* season together. "We like to



Anaïs Mitchell

surprise our audiences in the Penthouse, utilizing the special qualities of such a small space.”

First up, on the 16th, will be Luluc, the crystalline indie folk duo from Australia, now based in Brooklyn, and consisting of Zoë Randell and Steve Hassett. Luluc conjures hushed echoes of early Simon and Garfunkel by way of the Velvet Underground (which is to say the irresistible grace of early Paul Simon song style laced with the acid of Lou Reed). Luluc’s songs are all written by Randell and delivered by her with vocals that are positively Nico-esque, underscored by the pair’s shared, hypnotic guitar work. The impact is insidious and addictive.

“Luluc has arrived,” notes Charles Cermele. “And it’s nice that they’re new Americans, having just moved here from Australia.”

On March 17, singer-songwriter Anaïs Mitchell brings her beguiling and increasingly influential songwriting voice to the Penthouse. Ms. Mitchell is moving fast beyond her folk music roots

and has already composed an acclaimed “folk opera” entitled *Hadestown* that places the Orpheus and Eurydice myth in a poverty-struck post-apocalyptic America. It will be produced by the New York Theatre Workshop in April.

“When we think about every season, we always ask the question why here and why now for any given artist,” says Cermele. “Anaïs Mitchell is here now because she has this fantastic catalogue as a folk singer and is very much breaking out with *Hadestown*.”

The Cooper Clan will no doubt raise the roof on March 18. Broadway’s Tony Award-winning actor-singer Chuck Cooper (*The Life, Caroline, or Change*) and his three kids, Eddie, Alex, and Lilli Cooper—with burgeoning careers in their own right, on and beyond Broadway—will come together and rejoice in their family-bred vocal hegemony.

“From Lilli, a recent Elpheba in *Wicked*, to Eddie playing the plant, Audrey II, in the acclaimed Encores production of *Little Shop of Horrors*, this family is



Keri Scullin

Luluc

happening,” according to Cermele. “We’re very sentimental about families singing together here and we’re way overdue welcoming Chuck Cooper to *Songbook*.”

Broadway legend and celebrated cabaret artist Liz Callaway salutes the great songwriting team of William Maltby and David Shire on March 30. Callaway earned a Tony nomination

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in 1984 starring in Maltby and Shire’s venturesome musical *Baby*. Her vocal affinity for the intricately textured songs of this acclaimed duo will touch all of their essential notes—musical sophistication, psychological complexity, and show-stopping theatricality.

“We chose to put this show in the Kaplan Penthouse,” comments Cermele, “because we felt that it would be great to return Maltby and Shire—with all of their cabaret work over the years, and the inherent intimacy of so much of their work—to an intimate space. This show was Liz’s idea and she honors us by sharing it in this smaller venue.

Vocalist and composer Imani Uzuri arrives at the Penthouse on March 31 with a big voice and an excavating spirit that generates music of explorational power and depth. Her songwriting ranges across genres and cultures while remaining tethered to a very tasty ‘60s-derived groove. Her voice puts one in mind of a more operatic Nina Simone. Which is saying something.

“Imani was just recently in residence at the Park Avenue Armory’s Under Construction series,” notes Cermele. “She’s very much coming into her own. Her show here will feature both originals and songs from black American vernacular traditions. It’s going to be a really rich spiritual evening.”

Last season, Grace McLean won *American Songbook's* Invest in the Future of American Song competition sponsored by PGIM, the Global Investment Management Business of Prudential Financial, securing for herself a free concert in the David Rubenstein Atrium. Her appearance there was such a sensation that McLean has been invited back this year to close out the Penthouse season on April 1. Says Cermele, "We met Grace when she sang backup for one of our concerts. Jon and I went downtown to see her solo show and fell head over heels for her."



Best known for her work Off-Broadway in offbeat hit musicals like *Brooklynite*, *Bedbugs!!!* and, most notably, *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812*, McLean is an original, with a wild Broadway belt that she warps and woofs into marvelously unexpected shapes, ornamenting her own weirdly R&B-flecked originals, songs that flame out in bizarre cartoon colors. "Her creativity and her humor just knocked us out," concludes Jon Nakagawa. "We had to give her a bigger platform."



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For information call CenterCharge at 212.721.6500 or visit AmericanSongbook.org

From top: Chuck Cooper, Liz Callaway, Imani Uzuri