

LINCOLN
CENTER

presents

American Songbook

sponsored by Omnicom Group Inc.

Tuesday Evening, February 7, 2006, at 7:30 and 9:30

My Guy Cy: Lill' Celebrates Cy Coleman

Lillias White

GARY HAASE, *Musical Director and Bass*

RICHIE IACONA, *Piano*

BUDDY WILLIAMS, *Drums*

*This evening's program is approximately 75 long and will
be performed without intermission.*

Steinway Piano

Major support for *Lincoln Center's American Songbook* is provided by
Richard L. Fisher.

***This performance is made possible in part by the Josie Robertson Fund for
Lincoln Center.***

The Allen Room, Frederick P. Rose Hall
Home of Jazz at Lincoln Center

Notes on the Program

by Barry Singer

The best musical theater composers are impossible to pin down. They inhabit their creations—the terrain of their musicals—to a perfectly integrated vanishing point. Yet their voices remain unmistakable. It's a tricky conjuring act, or maybe just the ultimate con. Few have pulled it off more convincingly than the late Cy Coleman.

You may think you know his songs: a series of brassy seductions, the quintessence of sass and insinuation. Part of that impression is the work of the great lyricists he wrote with, particularly the ageless Dorothy Fields and the deliriously salacious Carolyn Leigh, with whom Coleman composed, respectively, *Sweet Charity* and *Little Me*. But there was far more to his range than the irresistible raunch of “Hey, Big Spender” and “I’ve Got Your Number.”

A Coleman song could nail most any theatrical moment. His bookwriters—the likes of Neil Simon, Comden and Green, and Larry Gelbart—all understood this. Give Cy the situation, then get out of the way. The results might be as lilting as *Little Me*’s “Real Live Girl,” as up-beat and wide-eyed as *Seesaw*’s “It’s Not Where You Start,” as wistful as *I Love My Wife*’s title song, as funky as “The Oldest Profession,” from *The Life* (which won Lillias White a Tony Award), or just an outright flag-waving stomp, like *Sweet Charity*’s “I’m a Brass Band” or pretty much the entire score of *Barnum*.

Like Jule Styne before him (another protean yet inimitable Broadway composer, whose centennial will be celebrated here at American Songbook tomorrow evening), Cy Coleman was a piano prodigy, born Seymour Kaufman in New York City on June 14, 1929. Though he actually gave recitals at Steinway and Carnegie Halls, among others, as a child, Coleman wound up abandoning classical music for jazz—as Styne had—leading his own jazz ensemble, the Cy Coleman Trio, to widespread success on the supper club circuit. And—just like Styne—this combination of formal classical training and jazz savvy proved a potent mix when, in the early-1950s, Cy Coleman began to write songs.

One of his first, “Why Try to Change Me Now?” (with lyricist Joseph Allen McCarthy), was recorded in 1952 by Frank Sinatra (whose song persona had been seminally shaped by Jule Styne in the 1940s). Coleman next fell in with another young Sinatra writer, lyricist Carolyn Leigh, who—with composers Philip Springer and Johnny Richards, respectively—already had given Sinatra “How Little We Know” and “Young at Heart,” two signature songs of his 1950s evolution. With Leigh, Coleman found his voice, turning out pulsating music to her luxuriantly suggestive lyrics, a combination that yielded a string of sizzling popular standards, including “The Best Is Yet to Come,” “It Amazes Me,” and “Witchcraft.”

His full-scale Broadway musical debut came with Leigh in 1960—an unsuccessful show called *Wildcat*, which featured Lucille Ball singing the hit “Hey, Look Me Over.” From that point until his death in November 2004, Cy Coleman belonged to Broadway. His productivity was legendary. The shows—*Little Me* and *Sweet Charity*, *Seesaw*, *I Love My Wife*, *On the Twentieth Century*, *Barnum*, *City of Angels*, *The Will Rogers Follies*, and *The Life*, among others—were wonderfully various and often sounded wildly different. Yet, all it took was a few bars of music to identify them as Cy Coleman’s.

The key? The Coleman rhythmic sense—all angular and unpredictable syncopation, as derived from jazz—a highly polished, classical craftsmanship,

PROGRAM

and an exuberant melodic imagination that somehow managed to sound both roisterous and effortless. A Coleman song usually went for the jugular, yet did so with style.

More than anything, Cy Coleman adored—as Dorothy Fields’ “Big Spender” lyric put it—“song, dance, good times.” Yet, he also relished a good challenge. “I think what’s more important than the subject of a musical is what you do with it,” he once said. “What’s your take on it? Usually I don’t get involved in something until I know. There’s an old jazz tune that goes ‘It Ain’t What You Do, It’s the Way That You Do It.’ To write what’s expected—you can get a college kid to do the research and write that. A take that’s different, that’s what makes a show interesting. You gotta have fun first.”

—*Copyright © 2006 by Barry Singer*
