



# JUDY KUHIN

*Rodgers,  
Rodgers  
& Guettel*



Can one family have a perfect interpreter? For the extended Richard Rodgers family, Judy Kuhn may be it. If this father, daughter and grandson share anything at all through their music, it is an unwillingness to surrender their secrets easily. Perhaps that is what makes the music of each one of them so mesmerizing. Ms. Kuhn guards those family secrets, even as she sings her way toward the light that exposes them.

Listen to the songs of Richard Rodgers on this collection, as the world has listened to his music now for nearly a century. Nothing in the effortless melodicism – not the joy or even the pathos that these songs so rapturously convey – suggests the crushing depression that haunted Rodgers to the end of his life. The stateliness of Ms. Kuhn's caressing vocals touches those notes with a respectful, intuitive grace.

Listen to daughter Mary's music here. No hint of the resentment that Mary Rodgers readily acknowledged she bore her often-distant father seems present in these songs. Only the wit, the lighthearted, even tenderhearted, lyricism of an openhearted creative spirit can be heard, a spirit that Ms. Kuhn captures with crystalline transparency.

As for Richard Rodgers's grandson – Mary Rodgers Guettel's son – Adam Guettel, his music possesses both his grandfather's penetrating melodicism and his mother's lyrical sense of play. Underscoring this utterly exquisite amalgamation, however, is the burden Adam Guettel has privately admitted to bowing under as the anointed heir to the Rodgers legacy. Ms. Kuhn's grounded vocal intensity and explorer's fearlessness sound the depths and heights of the



ethereal, probing melodies and anxious, questing lyrics that Adam Guettel continues to write. She simply gets it all, the reflections and the refractions, the generational push and pull, particularly in the multigenerational juxtaposition of songs, in which one melody seems to be saying softly to another, “Yeah, I got that from you.”

All three of these extraordinarily complicated talents were born in New York City; Richard Rodgers on June 28, 1902; Mary Rodgers on January 11, 1931; Adam Guettel on December 16, 1964. The grandfather's career in the theater is unmatched; a litany of hits, including many of the longest-running Broadway shows of his age. The theater's collaborative art defined Richard Rodgers, inspiring in him music that divided along the fault lines of his two most constant collaborators. Rodgers evolved two very different songwriting voices to set the words of his two infamously different lyricists; the erratically brilliant Lorenz Hart and the unfailingly brilliant Oscar Hammerstein II.

The operatic heft of Judy Kuhn's radiant soprano is ideal for the demi-hymns Rodgers wrote with Hammerstein, like “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'” and “Hello, Young Lovers.” Her lithe phrasing and vocal agility are similarly suited to navigate eloquently the fleet, jazz-derived melodies that Hart's lyrics drew from Rodgers, as ideally evidenced by “This Can't Be Love.”

Rodgers's genius was not only protean, it was also a little schizophrenic. Is it any wonder that his daughter Mary embraced her destiny as a musical theater composer, only to abandon it? Mary Rodgers's first Broadway hit was also her last, the much beloved *Once Upon a Mattress*, written with lyricist Marshall Barer, which moved to Broadway in 1959 after opening Off-Broadway. In 1966, she created another delightful score for another Off-Broadway hit, the *Mad* magazine revue *The Mad Show*. Ms. Kuhn unravels the unexpected turns and twists of the deceptively sophisticated melodies that Mary Rodgers wrote for such a relatively brief time, from the gently surging passion of “Am I?” from *The Griffin and the Minor Canon*, to the affirmative maidenly sass of “If You Ask Me,” a previously unpublished gem.

By the 1970s, Mary Rodgers was primarily writing children's books – to great acclaim; most distinctly with *Freaky Friday*. Here and there, she contributed individual songs to revues: to the 1978 collaboratively composed Broadway musical *Working*, and to Phyllis Newman's one-woman show, *The Madwoman of Central Park West*, in 1979. *The Griffin and the Minor Canon*, which the Music-Theatre Group produced in 1991, was her last effort as a composer. Not only did she cease writing music altogether, she barely ever touched a piano again.

Instead, she became her son's great champion. Adam Guettel's bounteous musical endowment was recognized early on by his mother particularly, if not by his grandfather, who died when Guettel was fifteen. The Richard Rodgers genius gene had clearly been passed to this profoundly original young composer, whose music climbed mountains that even his grandfather had not ascended.

Thus far, Adam Guettel has produced three full-length musicals, each of them a kind of masterpiece. *Floyd Collins* was the first. A musical exhumation of the heartbreaking hopes, dreams and death of a dirt-poor Ozark spelunker trapped in a cave in 1925, *Floyd Collins* ran for just 25 performances Off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizons in 1996. Many who saw it still cannot get it out of their heads. Ms. Kuhn vividly shows us why, stamping three majestic pieces from that score with her singular gift for folk-inflected theatrical naturalism.

*Myths and Hymns* and/or *Saturn Returns* followed *Floyd Collins*. A dramatized Guettel songfest largely derived from Greek myths and the text of a 19th-century American hymnal that Guettel happened upon in a bookstore, the show has had multiple incarnations under both titles, as Guettel has shifted back and forth in his perception of the piece. Each version shares one commonality: glorious songs instantly recognizable as the work of Adam Guettel. The score originally required a cast of six to handle its astonishing musical breadth. Ms. Kuhn encompasses it all on her own, from the enrapturing leaps of “Hero and Leander” to the heart-stopping “Migratory V.”

Adam Guettel’s most recent work was also his most successful, the sublime *The Light in the Piazza*, which won him Tony Awards for Best Score and Best Orchestrations, after premiering at Lincoln Center Theater in 2005. Fascinatingly, the idea for the show – an adaptation of a novella by Elizabeth Spencer – came from Mary Rodgers, who first proposed it to her father as a potential musical, before selling her son on it years later. Echoes of her own music seem to shimmer on the horizon of those songs from *Piazza* that Ms. Kuhn has chosen to include here, gorgeous glimmers of the emphatic maternal Rodgers influence.

Last June, the world lost Mary Rodgers, which makes this recording all the more poignant. It is also rather moving to realize that Richard Rodgers was still alive when Judy Kuhn, as a young vocal prodigy, embarked on her first big-time gig, a U.S. touring production of *The King and I*, starring Yul Brynner, in the 1980s. Ms. Kuhn’s career since has encompassed the full Rodgers family enterprise, which is ongoing. “I’ve been fascinated by their DNA since I first learned that Adam was Richard Rodgers’s grandson,” she concedes. “That all that music came from these three generations of one family. When has that ever happened? As an artist, I loved the idea of exploring this music, spanning so many styles and time periods. It is very challenging.”

Challenging indeed. And, if you listen closely, quite revealing.

—Barry Singer, April 2015

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