

RECORDINGS
IN REVIEW



T I M O T H Y Y O U N G

In what seems to be a rite of passage for many aging singers, once they have reached the venerable age of fifty, a standard career move is to explore the Great American Songbook. *Viz.*: Rod Stewart (five volumes and counting), Carly Simon, Natalie Cole, Annie Lennox, even Joni Mitchell. For some of these singers, the move is a slight shift to the center; for others, it seems like a 180-degree turn from their alternative and punk roots. The quality of the recordings is variable, to be polite, with some of the singers finding the heart of songs by Berlin, Rodgers and Hart, and Porter. Most of these run-throughs, though, seem to be principally exercises in nostalgia – pleasant enough for a dinner party.

This habit officially became codified as an American Cultural Practice in 2015 when Bob Dylan released *Shadows in the Night*, which was followed in 2016 by *Fallen Angels* – a pair of albums of covers of songs made famous (for the most part) by Frank Sinatra. If you’ve been waiting all your life to hear the man who was arguably the greatest champion of American folk music sing “Some Enchanted Evening,” “Young at Heart,” and “Skylark,” your wish has been answered.

Among the questions that this phenomenon brings up are: Are

we ready to agree that the Great American Songbook is the one truly unavoidable and indestructible music genre? Is it a type of music that is above rebellion? When the beatniks, the hippies, the punks, and the New Wavers age out of the radio-friendly zone, is it inevitable for them to admit the supremacy of the classic piano ballad?

In most of these recordings, the settings and arrangements are pretty much standard. Nothing distinctly personal has been done to alter the songs from their expected, almost codified forms. Only rarely do we find a singer willing to bend tradition and experiment, such as Bryan Ferry, who has created a number of recordings over his long career that take classics and spin them in interesting ways. He even did the reverse trick in 2013 with *The Jazz Age*, which features his own songs and some made famous by Roxy Music performed as 1920s jazz instrumentals. This time-shifting and genre-mixing game has even become a bit of a brand for some musicians, with acts such as the Baseballs performing rockabilly versions of Top 40 songs and Scott Bradlee's Postmodern Jukebox taking current pop hits and recasting them as ragtime or 1960s soul (with fitting album titles: *Historical Misappropriation*, *Selfies on Kodachrome*, and so on).

But as clever as these recordings can be, what is really needed is an effort to cut through the games, the homages, and the reverential approaches to find out where we stand with the Great American Songbook. It's not that we need any convincing to have faith in this type of music; it has roots and long-reaching influence. But there is a difference between simple adoration for the greats and a devotion to the form. I advocate an academic approach to the question: Who is out there creating *new* knowledge?

If there is one single source for talent that is carrying forward and expanding the Songbook, it is Linn Records in Glasgow, Scotland. This company may be best known to audiophiles as a maker of high performance stereo components, but over the past three decades it has established one of the strongest jazz/vocal labels in the world. The roots of the Linn story are entirely practical. In 1982, after a failed effort to find high quality vinyl records to test its turntables, the company decided to start pressing its own discs. The first in-house production was with a Scottish band called the Blue Nile. The group's 1984 debut album, *A Walk Across the*

Rooftops, did exactly what was intended: it served as an audio sampler varied enough in range to show off the quality of the company's equipment. The record achieved something else altogether by being one of the best pop records of the 1980s. The song "Rags to Riches" remains one of the most perfectly engineered sonic statements of the New Wave era.

The roster of Linn records includes a strong line-up of classical artists, including Ingrid Fliter, the Dunedin Consort, and James Gilchrist. *Gramophone* named Linn its Label of the Year in 2010. Having the perspicacity to maintain equally strong lineups of classical and jazz artists is a testament to great selection and extraordinary production. Linn nurtures its artists and by all evidence gives them a wide range to express themselves – as long as their production values are world-class.

Three singers on the Linn label exemplify the state and direction of the Great American Songbook (so much so that I think we may need to remove the geographic identifier and admit that a significant number of great songs are being composed outside the United States): Claire Martin, Joe Stilgoe, and Liane Carroll. They do it by bringing new perspectives to the classics, writing songs that fit in perfectly with the tradition, and adding songs from other genres in Songbook arrangements, honestly and unironically.

I've written about Claire Martin before for *The Yale Review*. In 2005, I highlighted her talent for covering talented popular songwriters and giving them places of importance in the cabaret scene: Joni Mitchell, Laura Nyro, David Sylvian, Paul Simon. I'm happy to say that she continues to go from strength to strength. For over two decades, she has produced consistently wonderful and well-researched recordings. One of her other brilliant contributions is singing the work of contemporary songwriters who write in the Songbook style – such as Mark Winkler, a Los Angeles singer who has had a long career of his own. Martin's wrenching version of Winkler's "Another Night" is one of the highlights of her 1997 recording *Make This City Ours*, and his lyrics for "lowercase" from *A Modern Art* precisely match the stops and starts of that Joshua Redman number.

Martin features a newer number by Winkler on her 2014 release, *Time & Place* (Linn AKD 423). "Catch Me if You Can"

(written by Winkler in 2011 with music by Eli Brueggemann) has the spirit and jump of a time-honored standard. If you don't look at the album credits, you could easily think that the song springs from a little-known early-1960s movie. Another key songwriter in Martin's world was her mentor, Richard Rodney Bennett, a composer of instrumental works, operas, and motion picture soundtracks. (He was nominated for an Academy Award three separate times.) She recorded three albums with him before his death in 2012: *Witchcraft*, *When Lights Are Low*, and *Say It Isn't So*. On *Time & Place*, she pays tribute to him with a pair of his songs, "Early to Bed" (written with Frank Underwood) and "Goodbye for Now" (with Charles Hart), a witty last will and testament.

Her album leads off with Bennett's arrangement of "My Ship," the plaint from Ira Gershwin and Kurt Weill's *Lady in the Dark*. In Martin and Bennett's hands, and with the support of the Montpellier Cello Quartet, each phrase of the song shimmers with precision. The quartet plays on half the album cuts, including "Featherfall," a rerecording of a modern art song by Geoffrey Keezer that Martin first sang on Keezer's 2003 album, *Falling Up*. Perhaps just as moving is her collaboration with the quartet on David Bowie's "The Man Who Sold the World," which falls into perfect rhythm arranged as a tango. The other standout pop/cabaret crossover is Lennon and McCartney's "She's Leaving Home," for which Martin is accompanied by the pianist and arranger Joe Stilgoe. They duet later on his song "Lost for Words," which could stand on its own in a totally new Broadway show about a beautiful, conflicted woman.

Martin has released a more recent album, *We've Got a World That Swings* (Linn AKD 524), with the tenor saxophonist and singer Ray Gelato. The recording, based on a concert tour they did in 2015, is definitely a swinging affair. Think of the late 1950s theme albums by Bing Crosby, Rosemary Clooney, and Billy May and turn up the energy a few notches. They joyfully romp through "This Could Be the Start of Something Big," "Something's Gotta Give," and "Smack Dab in the Middle." Martin gives Eydie Gorme a run for her money with a version of "The Coffee Song." The one major component of Claire Martin's standard brilliance that is lacking on this recording (notwithstanding her wonderful interplay with Gelato) is the presence of the pianist Gareth Williams,

who has played on several of her albums and in live shows, displaying exquisite skill in interweaving his melodies with her vocal line.

Joe Stilgoe, the guest pianist and arranger on *Time & Space*, is rapidly carving out his own career as the premier male Songbook artist in the United Kingdom. The son of the beloved comic songwriter Richard Stilgoe and the opera singer Annabel Hunt, he wears his pedigree well. A refined musicality is evident on his recordings and in his live shows. Stilgoe released the critically acclaimed *We Look to the Stars* (Linn AKD 497) in 2012, which featured many of his own compositions. In an alternate – and more sophisticated – universe, the rousing “I Like This One” would have been a major hit and “We Should Kiss,” as the follow-up single, would have climbed even higher up the charts. Movie lovers will like “That’s the Way It Crumbles (Cookie-Wise),” his song based on a memorable Jack Lemmon line from *The Apartment*. The standout track, though, is an expertly chosen cover, “Waterloo Sunset,” by the Kinks, rendered as a hybrid of a lullaby and a ballad. He slows the song down and finds a way to add more contemplative space into this already heart-tugging song.

Stilgoe’s follow-up, *Songs on Film (Live)* (Linn AKD 497), from 2014 is a concert album that captures his obsession with movies. His program encompasses everything from cartoon themes to songs from *Brigadoon* (“Almost Like Being in Love”), *An American in Paris* (“’S Wonderful”) and *Toy Story* and *Up* (the medley “When She Loved Me/Married Life”). The centerpiece of the recording is an eight-minute version of “Surrey with the Fringe on Top” which starts with vigor, then, after an extended solo section, slows down to the pace of Blossom Dearie’s classic languid version, just as we see “the stars getting blurry . . .”

Late 2015 saw the release of Stilgoe’s newest collection, *New Songs for Old Souls* (Linn AKD 484), for which he composed eleven of the fourteen tracks. His songs will bear up under the strictest hipster scrutiny because he has a deep knowledge of jazz and pop music history and a gift for rendering this erudition into wonderfully entertaining new forms. Though his songs bear identifiable rhythmic and lyrical referents, I wouldn’t dismiss them as pastiches. “Totally,” the album opener, sounds as though it would have been perfectly appropriate for the Mills Brothers and features

the walking bass line borrowed from Nina Simone's "My Baby Just Cares for Me." Close your eyes while listening to "Rainbows in My Teacup" and try to imagine which Dick Haymes film character would have sung:

I've got rainbows in my teacup,
 Found some moonbeams in the sand,
 And it feels like I've been told,
 Where they're keeping all the gold
 I never would have guessed
 My crockery is blessed.

"Pocket Song" features a big band arrangement that would have brought honor to Nelson Riddle. The album continues with charmers like "Two-tones" and "You're Funny (But I'm Not In Love)." The three covers included are "Too Late Now" (Lane and Lerner), "A Room with a View" (Noël Coward) and, in a thoughtful arrangement, "I Just Wasn't Made for These Times" by Brian Wilson and Tony Asher. Stilgoe has set this song as a duet with Liane Carroll, stripping away the shrill dissonance of the Beach Boys' original, matching his solid, mellow voice with Carroll's magnificent instrument.

Luckily for us, there is a large catalogue of recordings by Liane Carroll to explore. After bouncing around several small labels for over a decade, producing some very good, if slightly inconsistent, albums, Carroll produced the solid *Ballads* in 2013, which featured "Here's to Life," "Mad About the Boy," and two contemporary songs that are worthy additions to any modern cabaret songbook: "Pretending to Care," by Todd Rundgren, and "Calgary Bay," by the singer-songwriter Sophie Bancroft.

Carroll's latest release, *Seaside* (Linn AKD 533), finds her at last on Linn Records, where she rightly belongs. This arrangement has produced one of her strongest sets to date. Stilgoe wrote the title track, a paean to memory, specifically for her. She does justice to "Wild Is the Wind" and "I Cover the Waterfront," a pair of songs that require a fair amount of emotional control. Her take on "My Ship," a jazzy run-through, is a fine bookend to Claire Martin's controlled version on *Time & Place*. She sings Led Zeppelin's "Nobody's Fault but Mine" as the slow blues song that it is at its core. The discoveries on the disc are "Get Me Through Decem-

ber,” by Fred Lavery and Gordie Sampson, and “Mercy Now,” by Mary Gauthier – two great contemporary songs to store in the piano seat.

It has taken a few years for Liane Carroll to produce a pair of albums that are worthy of her stage performances. Her earlier albums were enjoyable, but they lacked the full power of her voice and its impressive range. The best way to hear Carroll’s earlier work is to listen to live tracks on YouTube, notably her version of “Take It with Me When I Go,” recorded at the London Music School in 2008, and “Picture in a Frame,” from the 2006 Brecon Jazz Festival, as passionate a jazz performance as you’re likely to encounter anywhere these days. It’s no coincidence that both those songs are by Tom Waits. Add her cover of “Take Me Home,” the simple song at the heart of Waits’s original soundtrack for *One from the Heart*, and you have the makings of a great album. (Note to Linn . . .)

This trio of writers and performers is at the center of a self-supporting constellation of jazz and Great American Songbook artists on the Linn label. They write songs for one another, perform intriguingly different covers of the same songs, and provide support by doing arrangements and backing work. It should be pointed out that several other fine artists share this same orbit at Linn, including Barb Jungr and Mari Wilson (with whom Claire Martin recorded the delightful *Girl Talk* in 2005) and the fine vocalist Ian Shaw.

If you’re in London, be sure to check the line-ups at Ronnie Scott’s, the 606 Club, and the Crazy Coqs: you might luck into an appearance by one or more of these fine musicians. I’ll go out on a well-supported limb and state that we are in the middle of a new golden age of Great American Songbook singers, composers, and interpreters. We can enjoy them without any need for a wink or an ironic tone of voice. They are the real thing, right now. Furthermore, the extension of the tradition – maybe we can call it the Modern Songbook? – is in the capable hands of Joe Stilgoe.