

Bistro Bits

BY JOHN HOGLUND

Portraits and Tributes

In "Portraits," her new show currently at *Café Carlyle* through March 27, **Betty Buckley** paints a palette of heartache and yearning in a show that should not be missed. If she sang nothing more than Richard Thompson's bucolic ballad "Dimming of the Day," it would be worth the price of admission. She brings her signature powerful delivery mixed with a profound vulnerability to matters of the heart with this beauty. That quality permeates most of the hour, and her folksy bantering with the audience is endearing.

With this show, Buckley takes the art of musical storytelling to a new level. With every note, she imparts a serene, been-there quality through long-line phrasing and that lush voice that can galvanize a room. Mary Chapin Carpenter's "I Am a Town" (recorded on Buckley's "Heart to Heart" album) paints a haunting portrait that lingers long after the final note. Lyle Lovett's "M-O-N-E-Y" brought out a whimsical Texas twang. Two medleys by different composers become novellas that take the audience on a dramatically compelling personal journey. At times, her story songs are like flowery monologues delivered like a poetry reading by a gifted orator. This was most obvious on a medley fusing "Pontiac" (Lovett), "Old Friends" (Paul Simon), and the pleading "Unchained Melody" (North-Zaret). The pictures she painted and the supple heartbreak she emoted were shattering in their intensity, creating a riveting, pin-dropping moment. Two songs from the movie "Cold Mountain" were less effective and bland. However, in a powerful reading of Sting's "Fragile" in the same medley, she created magic. The audience of idolaters didn't want to let her go, and two lively Frank Loesser songs closed an hour that was over too soon.

Kudos to jazz great **Kenny Werner** for flawless arrangements and to violinist **Todd Reynolds**, whose sensitive obbligato background helped Buckley paint with a wider brush. **Tony Marino** was on bass.

Like Garland, Buckley inhabits every song, and leaves her stamp that lingers long after the song is ended. For my money, Betty Buckley is arguably the finest cabaret and theatre singer of her generation.

In the past, I've said that the acid test for cabaret performers is in how much of their offstage persona they can bring on stage with them. **Phyllis Pastore** passes that test with flying colors. With a smile that could light up Gotham and a gurgling laugh that can make your heart giggle, she remains one of cabaret's sweethearts. In her recent series of shows at the *Duplex*, Pastore offered "Tribute: Songs I've Stolen From the Friends I Have

Left." With musical director **D. Jay Bradley** on piano, **Marco Brehm** on bass, and **Leslie Anderson** and **Jennifer Pace** on backup vocals, this was a lively, loose hour filled with guffaws and tender moments. It was not a big or grandiose act. Rather, a sweet, warm, enjoyable one that works because she makes you feel as though it's your best friend up there in the spotlight singing her heart out. It gives the audience pleasure just to participate in the process. **Phyllis Pastore** embraces a room with open arms and reveals herself with a sincerity other singers in town can learn from. A veteran of the piano bars as well as cabaret, she cajoles and cavorts with a lot of "in" jokes and campy setups—to the delight of an audience filled with piano bar and cabaret friends.

There were several terrific highlights, including a tenderly phrased "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning" (Mann-Hilliard), Bob Dorough and Lynn Gibson's "Right on My Way Home," and a campy "When I See an Elephant Fly" (Wallace-Washington).

Special guest **Mark McCombs** brought his riotous character comedy to the stage in a raucous hillbilly turn that was R-rated fun. His whole bit had the room screaming with laughter.

But it was **Phyllis Pastore** who, in spite of a cold that caused an occasional vocal glitch, gave one heckuva show. With her backup singers, she tore the place apart singing the '80s disco anthem "It's Raining Men" (Shaffer-Jabara). Closing with a tender "In My Life" (Lennon-McCartney), a longtime staple in her shows, she made us all glad that this gal with the warm voice and big heart is back on the scene again.

Quietly, jazz singer-pianist **Loston Harris** has been making a name for himself in the industry over the last five years. In his current open run at *Bemelmans Bar at the Carlyle Hotel*, his star continues to rise. A low-key artist, at best on extended jazz riffs on standards or original songs, Harris stands out because of his unassuming reserve. However, under the surface, there's a lion waiting to spring. Nuances of his idols, like Nat "King" Cole and Tony Bennett, complement his mellow tones and understated, meticulous phrasing. His vocal delivery is deceptively loose and his jazz piano improvisations are highly skilled. In a satiny voice, he brings new life to old chestnuts and reinvents them in his own style. There aren't a lot of dynamics going on, however, and he needs to include his audience more as he emotes. That aside, he's classy and has a style all his own. I look forward to seeing his star rise.

While back, I reviewed some CDs worth noting. Typically, there's never enough room to include the many high-quality albums that continue to be churned out, so I'll occasionally be including more here, starting with two noteworthy efforts:

John Bucchino—"On Richard Rodgers' Piano" (*Art Food Music*): Instead of releasing an album of his own



Phyllis Pastore



Betty Buckley

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