

Cabaret music is a hot commodity in recording industry

Technological advances and renewed interest in the art of song interpretation have paved the way for the resurgence.

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Purists could argue that you can't put cabaret music on record; that the art form demands the singer and the song be in the same room at the same time. Once you separate them, this thinking goes, it's no longer cabaret, just another compact disc.

That's partly true. Studio recordings are miles away from live performances and always will be. But recent advances in digital technology have shortened the distance. Place the right artist at the microphone with the right music and the results can be surprisingly personal, with much of the intimacy — the quality at the heart of any decent cabaret offering — preserved.

Plus, there's another reason to seek out cabaret music on record: it's where all the interesting work is taking place.

Cabaret, rooted so firmly in the past because of its natural reverence for composers old and familiar, tends to get stuck in a rut. Same songwriters, same songs, again and again. It once seemed impossible, but nightclub divas really are wearing out the usual Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers material that they love so much. Are there any nuances left unexplored in a song like "Someone to Watch Over Me"? Probably, but they tend to be few and far between these days.

It's a different story at the record stores. New and established artists are creating a revival of sorts in the art of song interpretation and that's really what defines cabaret music. They're taking chances, hiring actual orchestras and arrangers and coming up with listenable new ideas.

Moreover, they're expanding the songbook, bringing in new composers and unearthing ones that should have been included years ago. Here's a look at five new recordings that should please discerning cabaret fans.

Ute Lemper
"Punishing Kiss"

The future of cabaret has arrived with this record, the latest from the German singer and actress that Europe has been fawning over for years. "Punishing Kiss" is a down-and-dirty album that dwells in a dark, violent world of love and loss. It's perfectly cynical and full of surprises.

Lemper honors cabaret's core. She's a dramatic storyteller who manages to make it all sound personal. But she broadens the genre with high-tech touches and some new names on the songwriting credits. If anyone is carrying on the tradition of guys like Kurt Weill and Stephen Sondheim, it is Elvis Costello, Nick Cave and Tom Waits. Each is well-represented here and well-honored with Lemper's sneaky, spooky performances.

Mady Kaye
"Mady Kaye Goes Cabaret"

Texas may not be the heart of cabaret country, but Austin-based singer Mady Kaye shows that folks down there do know how to serve up heaping helpings of Gershwin and Porter and make it all so fun to consume.

Kaye takes two steps forward by taking one step back. Instead of lingering in the 1940s and '50s like most cabaret singers, she gets her inspiration here from the 1920s and '30s. These songs and their writers are familiar, but they're certainly not tired. It takes nerve to record straight-ahead renditions of ditties like "Goody, Goody," "They All Laughed" and "Ten Cents a Dance" in this post-punk musical age. But Kaye honors this material's place in musical history and by taking it seriously, she makes it respectable and worth a new listen.

This is a live recording. The applause and the banter might annoy some. But the format allows the singers warmth to come through and it is considerable. For information on this record, call toll free at 877-458-9900 or www.madykaye.com.

Jane Monheit
"Never Never Land"

With her debut recording, jazz vocalist Jane Monheit delivers something cabaret desperately needs: youth. She's just 22 and already dispensing insightful interpretations of classic tunes.

Monheit is not likely to lure teenagers into the club — songs by Duke Ellington and Antonio Carlos Jobim aren't exactly FM radio material — but age allows her to bring a genuine sincerity to ingenuer-friendly material like "Please Be Kind" and the title track. It's a nice change and part of a smart collection that also features great playing from musicians Kenny Barron, Ron Carter and Hank Crawford.

Joni Mitchell
"Both Sides Now"

For her first album of covers, the living legend Joni Mitchell has pieced together a strange combination both of songs we know and songs we ought to know. There are familiar tunes, a torrid "Stormy Weather," a sensual "You're My Thrill." But there are also tender readings of overlooked gems like "Comes Love," "I Wish I Were In Love Again" and "Answer Me, My Love."

This is a record for hard-core cabaret fans, folks who appreciate a singer squeezing every drop from a lyric. Mitchell slows it all down and conjures a confident perform-

ance exploiting the peaks and (because of her age) the evolving valleys of her voice. A lesser artist might want to jazz it up a little, make this an easier record to listen to, but Mitchell remains patient and keeps it vocally stark throughout.

Mitchell also expands the songbook by including herself in it. To the standards, she adds lush, string-laden covers of her own hits "Both Sides Now" and "A Case of You," which hold up just fine along side material from names like Harold Arlen and Lorenz Hart.

George Michael
"Songs from the Last Century"

When this record appeared on the shelves earlier this year, it was roundly dismissed by critics and ignored by Michael's legion of fans. They weren't wrong, they were just looking for something different from a guy who made his career doing pop and rock.

On the surface, "Songs" appears a disheveled mix of material, everything from "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" to "Wild is the Wind." But it works because Michael chose several well-worn pieces that still retain plenty of room for reinterpretation. Older hits like "I Remember You," get a fresh dramatic reading while a newer "standard" like the Police single "Roxanne" is turned into a desperate lover's plea.

It's a self-assured recording and Michael plunges into "Where or When" as boldly as he does U2's "Miss Sarajevo" and "First Time Ever I Saw Your Face." It's an interesting career turn for Michael, though it probably won't pay off.



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