

Don't Let This Good Thing Get Away! Maud Hixson Sings Mickey Leonard

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"I've always been drawn to great pairings of words and music—the kind that sound inevitable and conversational—and it has become my business to find these songs and sing them." – Maud Hixson

In 2003, young vocalist Maud Hixson was named Best New Voice at the (Twin Cities) Hot Summer Jazz Festival. The recognition was prophetic. Only a couple years into her career at the time, Maud was on a steep trajectory, from her early love for songs of the 1930s and 40s while growing up in St. Louis Park, MN to gigs at Twin Cities clubs like the Times, Rossi's and Dakota; from her duo Let's Not Be Sensible with mentor Arne Fogel and intimate duo Love's Refrain with husband/pianist Rick Carlson to the famed International Cabaret Conference at Yale in summer 2006. "Going to the Cabaret Conference and working with the people involved helped me zero in on what cabaret really is—presenting music for a listening crowd," says Maud. And thus came the inspiration for her new, groundbreaking recording, *Don't Let A Good Thing Get Away*, the first recording devoted to the songs of Michael (Mickey) Leonard.

The Back Story

To Maud, cabaret isn't so much a genre as a way of listening to the music, or more specifically to the stories of the lyrics. "It's listening in a different way than when the music is either wallpaper (background for conversation) or a wall of sound (modern instrumental jazz)," she explains. "I have always wanted to master the kind of performing that is about storytelling." The new recording and recent performances provide ample evidence that Maud Hixson has met her goal. In the years since that Yale conference, Maud has appeared in cabaret settings in New York, presenting (with pianist/music director Tex Arnold) the first show solely dedicated to the music of Mickey Leonard at the famed Duplex; appearing twice with pianist Jon Weber at the Metropolitan Room; and, again with Weber, performing in Jazz at Lincoln Center's Rose Hall for the 2011 New York Cabaret Convention. And in early 2013, through a successful Kickstarter fund-raising campaign, Maud was able to assemble a New York cast of musicians to document the Mickey Leonard project.

Of the myriad songwriters in Manhattan, why Leonard? "Pianist Tex Arnold introduced me to Mickey's music," said Maud, "though I'd become familiar with his song, 'Why Did I Choose You,' when I heard [Twin Cities vocalist] Sue Tucker's recording of it. I know a lot more songs from the '20s through the '50s, and he was mostly writing in the '60s. So at first, I wondered if I would like his music, considering my old-fashioned tastes for melody and harmony. But his music is gorgeous in every way, sophisticated and beautiful. This is why he was recommended so highly to me." Further, Maud notes that "I think Leonard is a great

composer...He's worked with a variety of wonderful lyricists, including one of my all-time favorites, Carolyn Leigh."

Leonard was more than a source of inspiration, however. He was also a physical and supportive presence during the recording sessions at NOLA studios. "This project is also appealing because I am able to work with the composer himself during the interpretive process," Maud notes. Maud was also able to work with the musicians who helped shape that first performance at the Duplex—pianist/arranger Tex Arnold, bassist Steve LaSpina, and cornetist Warren Vaché. Guitarist Gene Bertoncini joined the ensemble on several tracks. The experience at NOLA Studios proved magical, says Maud, "because of how all the elements came together. Those I had prepared, those the other participants brought to the experience, and those that happened because we were all inspired in the studio. It's what I believe you hope for and it was exhilarating to have happen... I didn't know what to expect as I've never been in this situation before, but I was gratified beyond my wildest dreams. What surprised me the most is that what we ended up with was so unforeseeable, and yet, that is as it should be. I was very fortunate."

And given the resulting album, there's good fortune all around, on both sides of the microphone.

The Recording: Don't Let a Good Thing Get Away (Maud Hixson, 2013)

Only a few songs on the album are well known (e.g., "I'm All Smiles," "Why Did I Choose You?"), and 4 are recorded here for the first time—Maud needed to arrange permission to make the first recordings. "I believe Leonard's catalogue is overlooked because only a fraction of it is well-known, and it is small," notes Maud. "Tex Arnold and I chose the songs, based on what we felt we could communicate well to an audience." The 12 songs here, all composed by Mickey Leonard, reflect his collaboration with five songwriters.

The album opens with the title track, with lyrics by Carolyn Leigh. "Her work is knowing and deft, with a light touch that is anything but superficial," wrote Maud in her liner note. The arrangement swings lightly, Maud's trademark clear articulation making the lyrics pop. Vache's muted cornet perfectly follows Maud's pristine reading and adds casual accents to the final verse. Here and on several other tracks, Maud finishes in a high-register flourish, adding additional drama.

Three songs feature the lyrics of Marshal Barer. "Old World Charm", from the musical version of Blue Angel, sports what Maud refers to as an "immodest lyric" – it's flirty in an understated way—and Maud is a master of charming understatement. Vaché is a bit sinister while bassist LaSpina keeps it moving this side of suspense. We don't miss the drums in this ensemble -- between piano and bass, there is enough light percussion. And it's irresistible. "The Time Has Come" was Barer's response to Stonewall riots, referencing Lewis Carroll's "The Walrus and the Carpenter." Bertoncini adds guitar, and overall the track flows like a pop anthem with a swing beat. Solos from Arnold and Bertoncini are among the album's

instrumental highlights, adding a bit of a tropical feel as if a choro smolders underneath. Maud, with unerring pitch, covers a wide vocal range, ending in another high note flourish. Surely one of the most lyrically engaging tracks, “The Spider and the Fly” was inspired by an 1829 poem by Mary Howitt (later subject of a parody by Lewis Carroll). Maud’s restrained delivery only makes the satire more entertaining, and the instrumental accompaniment is as devilish as the spider.

Lyricist Russell George is included in two very different songs. “Just a Little Love Song” was an unfinished work – until Maud contacted Mickey Leonard, “who added more musical ideas.” The result is a lovely ballad, seemingly written with Maud’s intimate delivery in mind. “Not Exactly Paris” was written for Margaret Whiting, who rejected the opening verse as too suggestive. Russell thus changed it, and Maud changed it back to the original. Tex Arnold starts with a hymnal tone that belies the text (“I’ve been hit on since I put on a training bra...” and “whiskey breath embraces...”). Yet, it’s really a love song from a woman who perhaps led a somewhat bawdy life and whose most significant relationship was never legalized by marriage -- “On a quiet night.. of all the men in my life, I remember one.” It’s not exactly risqué.

One of the loveliest tracks is a simple duo of voice and guitar, “Where Do the Lonely Go?” Leonard’s first published song, it was first recorded by Nancy Sinatra. Maud and Gene give it a wistful, yearning sheen.

The remaining five songs are all collaborations between Mickey Leonard and Herbert Martin, including two of the most familiar of Leonard’s catalog and four written for the short-lived Broadway production of *The Yearling*. “I’m All Smiles” is a stuttering waltz, and those little stutters in vocal and instrumental phrasing give the tune a swaying propulsion; LaSpina’s basslines also drive it ahead. “Growing Up Is Learning to Say Goodbye” offers what Maud notes is a “gentle but direct wisdom.” Singing with just piano in the first verse helps focus on the lyric and the singer, and their use of space within phrases is particularly effective. The rest of the band joins in, with Vaché delivering a beautiful solo. Starting out again with just voice and piano, “The Kind of Man a Woman Needs” again makes elegant use of space, and Vaché and LaSpina join Arnold for a magical trio segment.

Written as a duet for *The Yearling*, the familiar Leonard/Martin “Why Did I Choose You?” became part of Barbra Streisand’s songbook. Here, Maud (a French major and interpreter in her post college days) adds the official French lyric by Larry Trudel as a gently swinging duet with Arnold, whose intimate piano parallels Maud’s voice. In his turn, Vaché is simply luminous. Martin wrote the words to “Childhood’s End” after a visit to his boyhood home in Connecticut. Says Maud, “I found it easy to inhabit this story, as my room growing up was in an attic.” With just Tex she vocally explores every corner of childhood memories, with that same touch of regret one might feel at album’s end, save the fact we can play it again and again.

Maud seems to have no difficulty inhabiting any of these 12 stories. But beyond inhabiting the lyrics, she presents them to the listener as if he or she is the only recipient.

Don't Let a Good Thing Get Away is not avant-garde. The liberties Maud takes are more in the choices of songs and the delivery of stories than the choices of notes or extensions of harmony; Maud's art lies in the nuances that create a relationship between singer and story, between singer and listener. Perhaps too often reviewers refer to a musician, particularly a vocalist, as one who "makes every song her own." Maud makes every word, every note a gift, "inevitable and conversational." These songs do not belong to Maud. They're mine. Maud gave them to me --and I'm not giving them back.

The Minnesota release celebration for Don't Let A Good Thing Get Away will be held at the Dakota Jazz Club (1010 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis) on May 29, 7 pm, featuring the Rick Carlson Trio. The New York release will be scheduled later in 2013. More at www.maudhixson.com