

Reviews



What I See

Seattle Post-Intelligencer by Jack Goodstein

In Susan Stamberg's introduction to a 2008 interview with jazz vocalist Judy Wexler about her second album, *Dreams & Shadows*, she says Wexler can sing anything. "Wexler can be slow and sad without being goopy. She can straight-out swing, and she can take a classic jazz riff and keep riffing, even with words." Now the singer is out with album number four, *What I See*, and Stamberg's introduction still fits.

There is a lot of evidence of "goopy-less" balladry and plenty of straight out swinging, and there is a bit of classic jazz riffing as well. Wexler does pretty much everything you want from a top jazz singer, and she does it with an admirable restraint. She rarely flies too high, never even getting close to the sun. There are the singers who like to indulge in pyrotechnics; there are those who favor a controlled aesthetic. Judy Wexler is all about control.

There are 11 songs on her new album, most of them lesser-known tunes or what the liner notes call "a treasure trove of overlooked songs." This is neither the usual collection of pop or jazz standards, nor an ego-stroking selection of the artist's original compositions. There may be a standard or two, but by and large these are songs likely to be unfamiliar to the modern audience, and there isn't one of the 11 that bears the singer's name.

So if you are looking for the familiarity of tried and true material, you are in the wrong place. If you're up for something of an adventurous program exploring what may be new territory, this is an album you are going to want to hear. The one standard on the album everyone probably knows is "A Kiss to Build a Dream On," a tune made famous by Louis Armstrong, here delivered as a kind of sweet tribute to the master. Then of course she ends the album with her take on the not quite as well-known Billie Holiday number, "Laughing at Life." She even adds a little scat to her interpretation.

Her version of "Follow," a Jerry Merrick song best known probably as a recorded by Richie Havens, brings out its latent jazz potential. It is one of the highlights of the album, as is the swinging opening number, King Pleasure's "Tomorrow Is Another Day." She gives the tune a swinging traditional reading that gives it new life. The solo from the bass clarinet of Bob Sheppard works like a charm.

She turns seductress in the ballad "Convince Me" and there is a real story behind her version of "A Certain Sadness." Benny Carter's "Another Time, Another Place" gets a true jazz treatment and pianist, co-producer, arranger Jeff Colella adds some atmospheric work on the piano. Indeed, the support from the entire ensemble of musicians -- Larry Koonse (guitar, ukulele), Scott Whitfield (trombone), Ron Stout (trumpet, flugelhorn), Chris Colangelo (bass), Steve Hass (drums), and Billy Hultin (percussion) -- is top of the line.

What I See is the work of singer who knows what she wants to do with a song and makes sure she does it.

Critical Jazz by Brent Black

Judy Wexler gives true meaning to the word organic as it relates to popular song.

Eclectic and organic are two words that are the musical equivalent to "amazing" and "awesome" as used in everyday life. The latest effort from Judy Wexler is aptly titled *What I See* and is one of the finer examples of what connecting to a song is all about. Wexler's growth as a vocal artist is nothing short of "amazing" while holding true to a deconstructed approach to some delightfully left of center material from such luminaries as Rickie Lee Jones, Richie Havens and Benny Carter. Reharmonizing a work without ever losing sight of the original melody is a beautiful thing.

Most singers with a stage background have a difficult if not impossible task of shaking that theatrical presentation when performing. Wexler is a vocal chameleon easily adapting to a diverse collection of material and with the technical proficiency more closely associated with the traditional jazz singer. The band here consists of some familiar names with pianist and former Lou Rawls Music Director Jeff Colella leading the charge and with ace guitarist Larry Koonse following closely.

Highlights? Literally too many to list as each of the eleven tracks here are unique portraits of not only the artist that created the original work but of the meticulous reinvention of these rarities as given by Wexler. "The Long Goodbye" from the classic 1973 Robert Altman film is given a second chance at life along with the pre-World War II gem, "A Kiss To Build A Dream On."

I had the distinct pleasure of reviewing "Under A Painted Sky" and the exponential growth as an artist portrayed with *What I See* is nothing short of "awesome."

The Jazz Zine by Peter LaBarbera

"In the contemporary world we live in today, the musical industry -- particularly pertaining to singers -- has fashioned itself as a business type of showcase. Singers blessed with good lungs and pizzazz for movement -- particularly those that can belt the high note, are regarded as the best of the crop. Hidden in the world of singing is the troubadour or balladeer who can contain his or her volume while being faithful to the lyric and being articulate in delivery without so much as a hint of musical theatrics or hysterics.

Folks, such as us, who listen to jazz and appreciate the quality of an interpretation, whether it is a standard or jazz classic, find it fresh and delicious when an artist presents us with new material and new renditions on some of the standard ballads or up-tempo jazz classics. On this new CD delivered by Judy

Wexler, we're treated to all of this. What makes this music so special on this particular album are the songs she has selected. These are not the everyday standard ballads and love songs that we've come to expect on new recordings. Instead, Judy has treated us to some of the more obscure yet beautiful songs that we probably have heard at some time in our past and fail to remember. On this CD she reincarnated them with a special blend of understanding while she becomes one with the song in her unique fashion. Judy is a straight-ahead jazz singer with a deep penchant for the lyrics. After listening a couple of times to the music, I feel as if I were listening to someone tell me stories, mostly sad love stories. There is never any overdramatic emphasis on the lyrics; only heartfelt feelings over a lost love or an affair gone awry.,

Sometime ago I had the good fortune of seeing Judy perform live at a club near us in Temecula California called "The Merc". Having gotten to the club early – by the way, it's a very small club – Judy came by and personally introduced herself to those of us waiting to hear her perform. Speaking with her briefly, I found her to be inquisitive and interested in those of us she conversed with. I would imagine that this is a character trait of her personality and the way she treats the music she performs.

I loved all of this music. It is not overly done to dramatize the lyric, but rather, she just tells us the story and we can sense and feel the passions and meanings connected to each particular song.

To say that Judy gets some fine backing by the musicians accompanying her on this set would be the understatement of the year. The cream of Los Angeles jazz players, headed by Jeff Colella, who did the arrangements and accompanies Judy on piano, offers superb support. Bob Sheppard has some mesmerizing bass clarinet solos as well as some fine flugelhorn injections by Ron Stout. The venerable Larry Koonse offers some of his inimitable backings to help make this set of music memorable.

I would be remiss not to mention the inclusion of a song that takes me back many years. Louis Armstrong, of course, is best remembered for "A Kiss To Build A Dream On." Judy does a superb job in bringing back this melody to us. Trombonist Scott Whitfield plays wryly and relaxed to set the nostalgic and memorable mood."

Music Man Blog by Robert Nicosia

"**Judy Wexler** has just finished recording her 4th album, "**What I See**". Judy has a marvelous, pure, clean voice, but that's only one part of what makes her such a special singer. First and foremost, Judy is a wonderful storyteller. When you hear Judy sing any of the songs that she carefully hand picks, she brings life to the lyrics. She has the rare ability to magically combine the story with her beautiful voice and captures the full attention of the listener. The songs Judy recorded on this album cover a wide range of times and styles; and, yet, Judy has been able to put them together as if these songs were written just for this album. There are few singers who have the ability to select the songs Judy has and bring them to life as she does. After selecting her songs, Judy applies the final magic to her CD by bringing together some of the most talented sidemen on the West Coast: **Larry Koonse** on Guitar, **Bob Sheppard** on Bass Clarinet and Alto Sax, **Ron Stout** on Trumpet and Flugelhorn, **Scott Whitfield** on Trombone, **Billy Hulting** on Percussion, **Chris Colangelo** on Bass, and **Steve Hass** on Drums. These are a lot of parts to pull together and make it all fit together perfectly. So Judy brings in her long-time Pianist/Arranger, **Jeff Colella** to co-produce the album. Jeff, who spent almost two decades as the Music Director for **Lou Rawls**, put together all the beautiful arrangements that make this CD one of the best Jazz albums of the year."

Midwest Record by Chris Spector

"You sat through Wexler's first three albums knowing she was the real deal just waiting for the time she would pop wide open. Here it is, the fulfillment of all the promises that were all pretty well kept anyway along the way. With the kind of driving vibe Tom Waits had on "Nighthawks at the Diner" when he wasn't being laconic, Wexler can't help but become a hipster darling with this outing. With great, clear phrasing, a special kind of affinity for the chestnuts she's rolled out here and an overall hard driving kind of seduction, Wexler is going to make you putty in her hands. Smoking stuff that just doesn't run out of gas even after it's gone the distance. Check it out."

Jazz Weekly by George Harris

"What I've always liked about vocalist Judy Wexler is that she sounds like a working class lady. Picture if your waitress at the diner had pitch and rhythm. This is Wexler -- no histrionics, no false seduction, or pizzazz. She takes your order of Scrapple, and breaks into a song like "Convince Me" or "Laughing At Life" like it's a normal day at Norms. Few people can sound like they're connecting with you in that way. She also takes songs not normally associated with jazz standards. Sure, you've got a lovely take of the Depression Era "A Kiss To Build A Dream On," but pieces like "The Moon Is Made of Gold" or "The Long Goodbye" and especially "Just For Now" are surprise crunchy treats in a Whitman Sampler world where most boxes are just filled with the same milk chocolates. Her sense of timing and pace is exemplified by how she keeps toe to toe with the band which includes Jeff Colella/p-arr, Larry Koonse/g, Scott Whitfield/tb, Ron Stout/tp, Bob Sheppard/bc-fl, Chris Colangelo/b, Steve Hass/dr and Billy Hulting/perc. And, just like the best of diners, you don't realize how good it is until you miss it about an hour later for its aftertaste."