





The Art of Cool

Mark Winkler continues to swing on his latest release,
Jazz and Other Four Letter Words.

By Jonathan Widran



At first glance, the Gardenia Restaurant and Lounge in West Hollywood doesn't seem like an ideal place to showcase a veteran vocalist like Mark Winkler, who thrives on being hip and even writes and sings about it. Two such songs — “I’m Hip” and “Stay Hip” — contribute to the coolly swinging vibe on his latest album *Jazz and Other Four Letter Words* (Café Pacific Records). The venue is awash in dim, pink-hued lighting, has limited seating and an odd, L-shaped configuration that puts the performing artist at the meeting of perpendicular sightlines. Its performance schedule is as likely to feature cabaret singers and open-mic nights as anything remotely resembling jazz. Over the past 30-plus years, Winkler has certainly played more expansive, upscale rooms in his hometown of Los Angeles and elsewhere.

Yet after completing his encore, the buzz throughout the room — from his drummer Dave Tull to his longtime partner, Richard, to many of his performer friends in attendance — was about how perfect the cozy venue was for such an intimate show. Throughout the evening, Winkler regaled his audience with clever wordplay, both from his own songs and from those of heroes like Ira Gershwin (“Nice Work If You Can Get It,” “But Not For Me”) and Bobby Troup (“Hungry Man”). He also shared light-hearted anecdotes. While introducing the beautiful ballad “I Chose the Moon,” for instance, he recounted how he presented the lyrics to Richard as a way of saying that he was right to commit to him 34 years ago — though, Winkler added, it was perfectly human to wonder what might have been had he not made that commitment.

Interspersed among the songs from *Jazz and Other Four Letter Words* were two pieces that capture the essence of Winkler as a dreamer finding joy and fulfillment in his multi-faceted career, despite having never achieved the kind of stardom experienced by the artists who inspired him to become a jazz singer (Mark Murphy, Michael Franks, Al Jarreau) or many of the vocalists who have recorded his songs (Dianne Reeves, Lea Salonga, Randy Crawford, Nancy Wilson). The first of these, the comically tinged “Somewhere in Brazil,” finds the singer at a crummy strip mall in L.A.’s San Fernando Valley, dreaming that he’s samba-ing in Rio while singing a Jobim tune. He recorded an East Coast version of this live favorite on his 2011 set *Sweet Spot*. As Tull laid down the groove, he playfully assumed the role of a skeptic mocking those dreams. The second song — a perfect corollary to the first — was the brand new “Fame Adjacent,” in which Winkler waxes eloquent about an acclaimed life in music that’s always simmering just below stardom.

Speaking from his home in Hollywood shortly before Thanksgiving, Winkler sounds grateful that *Jazz and Other Four Letter Words* has earned some of the best reviews he’s received during his recording career, which began with *Jazz Life* in 1981. He’s also pleased with the solid radio play that “I’m Hip,” “Your Cat Plays Piano,” “Nice Work If You Can Get It” and the title track are receiving on stations like L.A.’s KKJZ, branded as “Americas jazz and blues station.”

Winkler says he wrote “Fame Adjacent” after his longtime radio promo guy, Mike Hurzon, expressed something less

than full-blown enthusiasm about *Jazz and Other Four Letter Words*.

“Mike has worked with me on three or four albums, and each one has gone on the JazzWeek charts and done very

well,” Winkler says. “But when promotion guys work with different clients, part of their job is to manage their clients’ expectations. He knows he can be straight with me. When I finished the recording, I felt it was one of my better works, and he liked it but wasn’t as excited as I hoped. I guess he was sort of wrong because many people *are* flipping over it.

“His reaction got me thinking that I’ve had this long career, starting in contemporary or what became smooth jazz before finding my niche as a straightahead songwriter and artist, and then later writing successful musicals and becoming a songwriting teacher at UCLA and other schools,” Winkler adds. “I thought, well, maybe this is it, this is as good as it’s going to be. And then I realized, you know what? It’s been pretty great.”

From the time he was a kid growing up in Hollywood, Winkler has been obsessed with great songwriting. At the Gardenia show, he mused, “When I go to heaven, Gershwin and Laura Nyro will be doing all the music.” His songwriting influences include Troup, Randy Newman, Carole King, Billy Joel, Burt Bacharach, Nyro (to whom he paid homage on his widely acclaimed 2013 set *The Laura Nyro Project*) and “the guy who wrote ‘The Piña Colada Song’” (Rupert Holmes). His musical sensibilities started to change, he says, while he was attending Los Angeles High School, which he says was then 60 percent African-American. He was hung up on Lesley Gore records when two of his best female friends gave him a Nina Simone album they said he needed to hear.

“I had wanted to be a pop singer from my young teens all through my 20s, until I started realizing that I didn’t have a true pop singing voice. I didn’t sing high enough to be Neil Young or gravelly enough to be Joe Cocker. It was light in a way, but I could draw on a heavier quality to navigate the real jazzy stuff.”

NEW RELEASE



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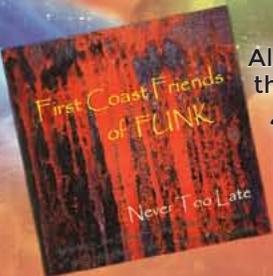
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"I was always absorbing and loving so much music from so many places," he says. "What I love above jazz and everything else that people associate me with is that it's sophisticated music with interesting chord changes, where the melodies go in unexpected directions. But my main criteria in everything I record, whether it's a song I wrote, a Great American Songbook standard or an old pop tune, is that the lyrics have to be great. A song has to connect with me on an emotional level for me to invest my heart in it."

When Winkler's aunt, Shirley Marlo, who toured in the 1950s with the Herb Silvers Band, first heard him sing, she immediately suggested he hook up with noted arranger Jimmy Haskell, who once played accordion with the band. Haskell liked him enough to produce Winkler's first rough masters at 17. The singer admits his first songs were "terrible, psychedelic pop," and he was initially crushed when one publisher at 20th Century Fox told him he needed to take songwriting lessons to develop his craft.

Within a few years Winkler found success as a songwriter with cuts on albums by artists such as Liza Minnelli and Stephanie Mills — but his goal throughout much of the 1970s was to be a pop singer on the level of Barry Manilow. His ambition shifted when he discovered Murphy, Jarreau and Franks, and realized his vocal style was more suited to jazz than to pop. "I had wanted to be a pop singer from my young teens all through my 20s, until I started realizing that I didn't have a true pop singing voice," he says. "I didn't sing high enough to be Neil Young or gravelly enough to be Joe Cocker. It was light in a way, but I could draw on a heavier quality to navigate the real jazzy stuff."

After experiencing what he calls "beginner's luck" with *Jazz Life* — which has been reissued three times in Japan over the ensuing decades — he endured a rough few years before co-writing "Land of the Loving" with pianist David Benoit. The song, which featured a vocal by Dianne Reeves, appeared on Benoit's 1986 album *This Side Up*. Winkler's own breakthrough as a singer came the following year with the release of his album *Ebony Rain*, which included lyrics Winkler penned for Benoit's "Rainbows" and Joe Sample's "Night Flight."

Winkler attributes his emergence as a singer to his desire to work with people he admired, most prominently Benoit and Sample. He made a list of artists and producers he wanted to work with and wrote lyrics to their existing instrumental songs. He penned words to "Night Flight" from Sample's *The Hunter* and sent it to the Crusaders' legend for approval and, hopefully, his participation. Graciously, Sample helped the singer get the song into better shape and played piano on the session.

Though Winkler often included a few straightahead jazz tunes on his projects, his late '80s and '90s albums *Hottest Night of the Year*, *Color of Love*, *Tales from Hollywood* and *City Lights* — which featured contributions from the likes of Dan Siegel, Boney James, Gerald Albright, Michael Lington, Tom Scott, Brian Bromberg, Doc Powell and Grant Geissman — made him a popular draw in smooth-jazz circles. That was until Broadcast Architecture — a service that gauges listener tastes — came on the scene and informed stations that they could reach a broader audience by shifting their focus to star R&B vocalists like Luther Vandross and Anita Baker.

Being shunted from the smooth-jazz format opened numerous new creative doors for Winkler, including the opportunity to co-write, with Shelly Markham, *Naked Boys Singing!*, which ran for 16 years in New York City (it's the second-longest running show in off-Broadway history) and played in Brazil, Italy, Australia, the UK and Scandinavia. Winkler has co-written several musicals since, including *Too Old For the Chorus* and *Playing It Cool*, which was nominated for several local theater awards when it opened in Los Angeles.

As a singer, he launched into the straight-ahead market with 1999's *Easy the Hard Way* and set the tone for his current career in the genre with 2003's *Mark Winkler Sings Bobby Troup*, which, Winkler says, celebrates the discovery of "a kindred spirit, a white guy from another era who, like me, sang quirky lyrics and swung a lot."

"Of course," he laughs, "he was married to Julie London and I am not. But I viewed Bobby as a talisman for my own career, and this album led to the next stage of it. Everything centers around my love of jazz. I wrote the song 'Jazz is a Four Letter

Gone to the Dogs

One of Mark Winkler's quirkier songs on *Jazz and Other Four Letter Words* is "Your Cat Plays Piano," and he has placed his share of rescued felines in good homes over the years. Yet as any of his longtime fans or friends can tell you, his deeper concern and mission is the rescue and placement of dogs. On YouTube, viewers can see a beautiful video for a charming canine love song called "Dog Passages" that Winkler wrote for his 2007 musical *Too Old for the Chorus*. The singer also put his passion for pups into his involvement with a musical called *Bark* — which has played everywhere from Key West to Nashville.

Lamenting that we seem to live in a "throw-away society that carelessly discards its animals" and that "too many people prefer puppies to older dogs," Winkler cites the harsh reality that five million dogs and 11 million cats are killed each year in shelters. In addition to regular Facebook postings, he has amassed an email list of 2,400 people to which he sends blasts every time he learns of a dog in need of a new home. A lifelong dog owner himself, he has lost count of the exact number of dogs he has helped place over the years — but he cites numerous follow-up stories filled equally with happiness and heartbreak. Though he



prefers to do this work independently, he participated in 2014 in a fundraiser for the Burbank, California-based Petmania, a store dedicated to animal adoptions.

"People adopt a dog and their life changes," Winkler says. "My mother had five French poodles when I was growing up, but I can't really explain just why I've always loved them to the degree I do. I can try to logically analyze this the way I analyze my love for Mark Murphy and Laura Nyro, but in the end it's that unexplainable visceral reaction to something that drives the passion." —JW

Word' after reading some articles about the so-called death of jazz and how jazz isn't a relevant art form anymore. But they're wrong; jazz isn't dying, because there are always great artists coming up that put their own spin on what jazz is. Gregory Porter is a fantastic singer-songwriter who uses the medium of jazz and soul. Jamie Cullum can take a Pharrell Williams song like "Frontin'" and make it a hit."

The "next stage" of Winkler's career currently includes collaborations with longtime pal and collaborator David Benoit and with The Manhattan Transfer's Cheryl Bentley. When Benoit decided to record *2 In Love*, the first predominantly vocal album of his career, with Jane Monheit, he immediately tapped Winkler to write lyrics. The singer's contributions include co-writes of "This Dance," "Dragonfly," "The Songs We Sang"

and "Something's Gotta Give," which found new life years after Winkler and Benoit wrote it for a proposed musical about Marilyn Monroe.

"There's this comfort zone working with Mark," Benoit says, "and I always know he'll deliver right on time and make sure every detail is perfect and fits my music just right. His lyrics are very clever, and often funny and literary, too. And what composer doesn't appreciate a lyricist who is willing to rewrite if necessary? Looking at his career as an artist, I admire the fact that he's stuck with it so long, adapting to what's current and always looking to collaborate with new people to keep things fresh and interesting."

One of these is Bentley, a Winkler fan who met him through her longtime engineer, Tom McCauley. In addition to both having parents who performed with big bands, the two found they shared a mutual

love for 1950s jazz singers like Troup, Chris Connor, June Christie and Chet Baker, and thought it might be fun to record an album together capturing some of that old-school magic. Their chemistry extends from the dozens of shows they've performed together to the 2013 release of the standards-driven *West Coast Cool*. On *Jazz and Other Four Letter Words*, they also duet beautifully on "I'm Hip" and "I Wish I Were In Love Again."

"I think the thing that defines Mark is that he does it all so well," Bentley says. "He is constantly writing, creating songs with dynamic concepts in mind and which showcase a great sense of music history and a strong sense of storytelling. He's also a strong singer in the Mark Murphy vein, and a performer who brings to the stage a dynamic personality. He's full of energy, fun to be around and work with and, maybe most important of all, like Frank [Sinatra] once sang, he's young at heart." ●