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## DVD/CD REVIEW

By Pete Roche

### JUDY COLLINS: A LOVE LETTER TO STEPHEN SONDHEIM

Stephen Sondheim isn't exactly desperate for people to interpret his work.

The New York-bred composer is responsible for some of the most memorable Broadway musicals of our time, after all—and has a mantel full of Tonys and Grammys to show for it. He also boasts a Pulitzer (1985) and the Presidential Medal of Freedom (2015), among other accolades.

A student of theater icon Oscar Hammerstein II (*Oklahoma*, *South Pacific*), Sondheim collaborated with Leonard Bernstein on *West Side Story* (1957) and with Richard Rodgers for *Do I Hear a Waltz?* (1965) and found fame in the 1970s by scoring productions like *Pacific Overtures* and *Sweeney Todd* for director Hal Prince. Sondheim has also written for film and television, having contributed songs to big-screen adaptations of *The Birdcage* (1996) and *Into the Woods* (2014).

Sondheim's tunes have already been recorded by the best singers in the biz, with some receiving special in-studio treatment hundreds of times over. So if we're to add another voice to the ever-expanding list of Sondheim salutes, it better be a damn good one—potent, distinct, mesmeric, and worthy of the material—if its owner hopes to distinguish him or herself from the multitude. Judy Collins has delivered.

In a recent (May 2016) concert devoted to the legendary lyricist, the chanteuse who inspired Crosby, Stills & Nash hit "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" gave fresh breath to Sondheim's best bits, to the delight of a packed Boettcher Hall in Denver, CO. Said program is now a major DVD release from Cleopatra Records, produced in conjunction with Collins' own Wildflowers label. Shot and recorded by rock 'n' roll documentarians Pierre and Francois Lamoureux (Rush, Joe Satriani, Brian Setzer), *A Love Letter to Stephen Sondheim* finds the 70-something Collins in high gear, regaling an enraptured audience with schoolgirl enthusiasm and crooning with crystalline clarity.

"I was amazed at the scope of what he does," says Collins of Sondheim. "The progress of his work is remarkable. He's always taking chances. The songs can be deeply personal...but also hysterical, funny, and outrageous at times."

Accompanied by pianist Russell Walden and the Greeley Philharmonic Orchestra (Glen Cortese conducting), Collins breezes through a batch of Sondheim from throughout his career...and squeezes in a couple surprise (non-Sondheim) numbers to boot. The result is a moving, ninety-minute musical "love letter" wherein Collins and friends pay homage to the modern-day Broadway bard and express thanks for his whimsical works.

"His music is transformative," posits Judy early on. "It certainly transformed my life. So I wanted to add things I hadn't heard done by other artists, add to these songs that hit me right in the solar plexus."

Add and embellish she does, after striding onstage in an elegant evening gown and serving up the toast and honey of Joni Mitchell's "Chelsea Morning" with her custom twelve-string acoustic guitar. The melancholy "No One is Alone" (from Sondheim's *Into the Woods*) gives the Mile High crowd its first taste of vintage Stephen. Replete with strings and woodwinds, the don't-judge-a-book ballad views mistakes as positive learning experiences that define—and *evolve*—each of us.

Microphone in hand (and guitar temporarily tucked away), Collins gracefully announces even the most awkward, cumbersome Sondheim expressions, as on mischievous *Sweeney Todd* entry "Green Finch and Linnet Bird" (*Teach me to be more adaptive!*) and *Sunday in the Park with George* offering "Sunday" (...by the green soft elliptical grass) while Walden plinks at his rose-adorned Steinway & Sons.

The anatomy-of-a-firearm verses of "Gun Song" (*Assassins*) cleverly trace the lineage of a pistol from the hundreds of metalworkers who forge its cold steel to solitary sniper, who need only move his little finger to change the world. "There Won't Be Trumpets" (from *Anyone Can Whistle*) heralds the arrival of ordinary, everyday heroes.

Collins picks up her guitar again for an engaging John Denver medley that mashes the travel-weary "Leaving On a Jet Plane" with outdoor anthem "Country Roads." Fans are shy about singing along at first, but Judy gets the better of them soon enough.

"Finishing the Hat" depicts Seurat's final brushstrokes, painstakingly made as the world keeps turning outside his window. Collins prefaces "Children and Art" by telling how she and her husband were first introduced to Sondheim (via *Sunday in the Park*). "We've been married 38 years," she reports. "Remarkable, for a hippie!"

Collins eventually met Sondheim in person at a fundraiser in 1978, at which time he thanked her for making "Send in the Clowns" his first Top Ten hit. Judy plays it again here, aching English horns and silky strings lending poignancy to the fools' fable. "The Road You Didn't Take" (from 1971's *Follies*) and "Being Alive" (from 1970's *Company*) illustrate additional vignettes of regret and error, all couched in Sondheim's subtle humor.

Collins soars on the dreamy "I Remember Sky" and earnest "Take Me to the World." Walden's pretty piano measures propel "Anyone Can Whistle," but the Greeley musicians add jazz muscle and momentum to finale "I'm Still Here." Collins heads up a lovely a cappella "Amazing Grace" as the credits begin to roll.

Bonus interview footage captures Judy in her NYC apartment, where she remembers how Leonard Cohen convinced her to give Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* a spin on her turntable. Fascinated by "Send in the Clowns," Collins reached out to producer Hal Prince, who gave his blessing for her hypnotic cover.

Decades later, Sondheim granted Collins full access to a treasure trove of his unreleased recordings for Collins to peruse for studio consideration.

Collins—who's been nominated for a Grammy for the duet album *Silver Skies Blue* (with Ari Hest—is on tour now. She'll return to Cleveland for another show at Music Box Supper Club on February 8, 2017.

Judy Collins: A Love Letter to Stephen Sondheim is available on Amazon.com. Visit [JudyCollins.com](http://JudyCollins.com) for additional news and tour dates.



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