

With his new album, Kurt Elling – the outstanding male vocalist in jazz today – celebrates a legendary legacy from outside the jazz world. *1619 Broadway – The Brill Building Project* honors a locale that the London *Telegraph* called "the most important generator of popular songs in the Western world." Even for the ceaselessly inventive GRAMMY®-winning singer-lyricist, it's a hugely unexpected step, and one guaranteed to further solidify his reputation for bold innovation and superb craftsmanship.

"Having done so many projects about my love for Chicago," Elling says, "I wanted to make something that spoke of my love for New York." The two cities define his career. Elling developed his craft in Chicago, and recorded several of his early albums there – including his debut, *Close Your Eyes*, which catapulted him onto the national stage and earned the first of his many GRAMMY nominations. (All told, every one of Elling's ten albums has been nominated for at least one jazz GRAMMY – a streak unequalled in GRAMMY history.)

But in fact, Elling and his family have lived in Manhattan since 2008, and *1619 Broadway – The Brill Building Project* is his response to that experience.

"I didn't want to cover any of the New York songwriters jazz people usually go to: the Gershwins, Rodgers and Hart, Cole Porter, all of whom I love; I wanted to reach out for something different for jazz. The vast collection of songs coming out of The Brill Building seemed like a gold mine."

A honeycomb of offices and claustrophobic studios at 1619 Broadway, in the heart of midtown Manhattan, the fabled Brill Building at its peak served as the creative home for more than 160 tenants associated with the pop-music industry. Of these, the vast majority were composers and lyricists. From the mid-1930s through the early 1970's the architects of the "Brill Building Sound" churned out a preponderance of the popular songs that three generations of America grew up hearing and singing.

The term "Brill Building Sound" describes the string of rock-and-roll masterpieces that defined the genre and signaled its first maturing. These instantly recognizable songs came from such songwriting teams as Lieber and Stoller ("Stand By Me"), Goffen and King ("Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?"), Mann and Weil ("You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling"), and Bacharach and David ("Walk On By"). Such teams crafted hit after hit while working in a physical environment with paper-thin walls that allowed the writing teams to hear and learn (or steal) from each other. It became a fertile and competitive hothouse of cross-influence and collaboration.

Even as Elling began researching this material, he "knew this would be a challenge, because the Brill is so much associated with doo-wop" – not his usual neighborhood. For help, he turned to a friend: hit songwriter and educator Phil Galdston ("Save The Best For Last").

"This is really his métier, and he did encyclopedic research," says Elling. "We must have touched on a couple hundred songs before we narrowed it down. Phil did a masterful job of codifying first-tier, second-tier, third-tier choices. Several of my choices, like the classic 'On Broadway,' were foregone conclusions; some, like that hip lick recorded by The Coasters, 'Shoppin' For Clothes,' gradually percolated to my attention." And, indeed, the reworking of that novelty "B-Side" falls right into Elling's penchant for spoken-word fun, games and hipster jive.

Another surprise choice is the Goffen-King exercise in social satire, "Pleasant Valley Sunday." As Elling recounts, "I had summarily dismissed that one until it had time to simmer on its own, and I found an idea on how to handle it." This version mixes John McLean's retro-lectric guitar, authentic-sounding sound clips of the 60s, and an audio profile that recalls Ken Nordine's classic "Word Jazz." The result is a trippy and darker- than-the-original ride through a neighborhood that the Monkees first visited in 1967.

Some jazz fans may raise an eyebrow at these song choices, but they'd do well to remember that throughout the 20th century, artists from Louis Armstrong to Sonny Rollins and Herbie Hancock have successfully transformed one era's pop songs into another generation's jazz standards. And throughout his career, Elling has worked to expand the jazz repertoire, sprinkling his albums with songs made famous by (among others) The Zombies and King Crimson.

Some of the tunes on *1619 Broadway – The Brill Building Project* were actually written years after their composers had left the Brill entirely. For example, Elling explains, "Carole King, like many other signatories to 'The Brill Sound,' never had an actual office at the Brill. So it doesn't pay to be too didactic about any of this. The Brill is both a physical reality and a mental construct; and because of that, I felt comfortable casting a wide net."

That wide net contains more than rock and doo-wop. As Elling's inspired song choices reveal, the Brill was a hive of music activity from the mid-30s on, housing the creative efforts of Irving Berlin, Sammy Cahn, Johnny Mercer, Harry Warren, and more. One survey estimates that of the 1200-odd songs performed between 1935 and 1948 on the *Your Hit Parade* broadcasts (radio and then television), more than 400 of them – nearly a third of the total – came from Brill tenants. Thus the inclusion here of such Great American standards as "I Only Have Eyes For You" (Warren/Dubin, 1934) and the Sinatra signature "Come Fly With Me" (Cahn/VanHuesen, 1957).

For that matter, even Duke Ellington (through his long-time publisher Irving Mills) leased space in The Brill, as did Nat "King" Cole and a host of other Swing Era stars. Elling pays heed to that corner of the Brill as well, with the Duke's "Tutti For Cootie," written to showcase the Ellington band's unsurpassed trumpeter Cootie Williams. And on the flip side, Paul Simon, represented here by "American Tune," still keeps an office at the Brill.

On track after track Kurt Elling and Laurence Hobgood, his collaborator for two decades, illustrate the creative fireworks that have marked their work together from the start. Some tracks, such as "On Broadway" and "You Send Me," glow with atmospheric reharmonizations (either audacious or subtle), unexpected rhythms, and jazz sensibility. Others, such as "I'm Satisfied" and "A House Is Not A Home," artfully distill the essence of the original through a jazz filter. But all of them manage to strike a balance of tradition and modernity that will by now be familiar to Elling's longstanding admirers, on a program of songs guaranteed to bring new fans to the party.

The party takes place at *1619 Broadway*, as *The Brill Building Project* provides the inspiration for intrepid explorations by one of the great jazz singers of our time.