

Kurt Elling

GRAMMY winner Kurt Elling is among the world's foremost jazz vocalists. He won the *DownBeat* Critics Poll for fourteen consecutive years and was named "Male Singer of the Year" by the Jazz Journalists Association on eight occasions. Grammy nominated over a dozen times, Elling has also been honored with international jazz awards, including the prestigious Edison Jazz Oeuvreprijs (Lifetime Achievement Award).

Elling's rich baritone spans four octaves and features both astonishing technical mastery and emotional depth. His repertoire includes original compositions and modern interpretations of standards, all of which are springboards for inspired improvisation, scatting, spoken word, and poetry.

The New York Times declared, "Elling is the standout male vocalist of our time." The *Washington Post* added, "Since the mid-1990s, no singer in jazz has been as daring, dynamic or interesting as Kurt Elling. With his soaring vocal flights, his edgy lyrics and sense of being on a musical mission, he has come to embody the creative spirit in jazz."

Elling was the Artist-in-Residence for the Singapore and Monterey Jazz Festivals. He has also written multi-disciplinary works for The Steppenwolf Theatre and the City of Chicago. The Obama Administration's first state dinner featured Elling in a command performance.

Elling is a renowned artist of vocalese—the writing and performing of words over recorded improvised jazz solos. The natural heir to jazz pioneers Eddie Jefferson, King Pleasure and Jon Hendricks, Elling has set his own lyrics to the improvised solos of John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, Keith Jarrett and Pat Metheny, among others.

He often incorporates images and references from writers such as Rilke, Rumi, Neruda and Proust into his work. The late poet and Bollingen Prize winner Robert Creeley wrote, "Kurt Elling takes us into a world of sacred particulars. His words are informed by a powerful poetic spirit." Said Robert Pinsky, former Poet Laureate of the United States, "In Kurt Elling's art, the voice of jazz gives a new spiritual presence to the ancient, sweet and powerful bond between poetry and music."

Elling has toured vigorously throughout his career, thrilling audiences around the world. In that time he has led his own ensemble and has collaborated with many of the world's finest orchestras.

In 2017 Elling can be seen touring with the Branford Marsalis Quartet in the US and Europe. Their Grammy-nominated recording *Upward Spiral* (Okeh/Sony) seamlessly integrates Elling's vocal prowess into their tightly knit, almost telepathic ensemble.

— Recordings —

CLOSE YOUR EYES, 1995 (Blue Note). Kurt Elling's recording career began at age 27 with the release of *Close Your Eyes*. Most of the songs on the album were part of a demo which was the catalyst in his obtaining a recording contract with Blue Note. Co-produced by Elling and his collaborator, pianist Laurence Hobgood, the album featured the first incarnation of the Kurt Elling Quartet and introduced many signature aspects of the singer's sound: vocalese versions of jazz compositions and improvised solos, the melding of poetry and music, and original compositions. *Close Your Eyes* secured Elling his first Grammy nomination.

THE MESSENGER, 1997 (Blue Note). His second Blue Note recording cemented Elling's critical reputation (along with that of Hobgood) as a producer, arranger, and composer. Re-workings of the standards "Nature Boy" and "April in Paris" set the stage for a suite of Elling/Hobgood originals and more vocalese. Said the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "More than any mainstream singer to come along in recent times, Elling thrives on free expression...but as much of a wild streak as all this suggests, Elling imparts a sense of being in complete control of his destiny."

THIS TIME IT'S LOVE, 1998 (Blue Note). Elling's third recording was a romantic outing that opened with "My Foolish Heart," still a staple of Elling's live shows. *This Time It's Love* addressed the theme of love with hip arrangements of jazz standards and new Elling/Hobgood compositions. *DownBeat* gave the recording four-and-a-half stars and said, "Again, the singer reveals his grand gift for vocalese lyrics." The record earned Elling his third Grammy nomination.

LIVE IN CHICAGO, 2000 (Blue Note). The next Grammy-nominated release was recorded live at Chicago's storied Green Mill Lounge, Elling's home and long-time artistic base in Chicago. Comprised largely of previously unrecorded material, the album featured Elling singing with jazz legend Jon Hendricks and blowing by Chicago tenor greats Von Freeman, Ed Petersen and Eddie Johnson. Elling pushed the boundaries of vocalese on "Night Dreamer," Wayne Shorter's signature composition. "This CD," wrote the *Jazz Educators Journal*, "reflects Elling's utterly creative genius."

FLIRTING WITH TWILIGHT, 2001 (Blue Note). Elling's fifth recording, *Flirting With Twilight* presented a collection of timeless songs set against spare, yet gorgeous, horn arrangements—and featured an all-star rhythm section of collaborator Hobgood on piano, bassist Marc Johnson (Bill Evans, Steps Ahead) and drummer Peter Erskine (Weather Report, Steely Dan). *DownBeat* exclaimed, "Nothing prepared me for Elling's accomplishment on 'Flirting With Twilight,' a cohesive, highly personalized exploration of twelve demanding love songs...which he addresses with the legato grace of a master ballroom dancer." *JazzTimes* added, "With 'Flirting With Twilight' ...Kurt Elling continues his triumphant reign as the thinking man's vocalist." *Flirting With Twilight* garnered two Grammy nominations, including one for Laurence Hobgood's arranging.

MAN IN THE AIR, 2003 (Blue Note). For his sixth Blue Note record, *Man In The Air*, Elling wrote and performed lyrics for nine jazz classics. Writers as diverse as Pat Metheny, Herbie Hancock, John Coltrane, Bobby Watson, and Joe Zawinul all received an Elling treatment. The album featured an epic seven-minute vocalese of "Resolution," the second movement on John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. Biographer Lara Perigrinelli wrote, "The success of these pieces tends to hinge on vocal control, sonic atmosphere, and use of space. Their lyrics follow suit. Elling wrestles with themes of love, life, loss, and the indefatigable human spirit in all of their complexities without allowing himself to indulge in clichés or platitudes."

NIGHTMOVES, 2007 (Concord). For his first outing on the Concord/Universal label, Elling conjured a noir-ish exploration of life between dusk and dawn. With guests Howard Levy, Romero Lumbambo, Christian McBride and Bob Mintzer, the new disc featured Elling's own writing alongside that of Duke Ellington, Betty Carter, and Antonio Carlos Jobim. Said *JazzTimes*, "If there is a royal bloodline of male jazz singers, I'd suggest it progresses from Satchmo to Mel Torme, to Jon Hendricks to Mark Murphy to Kurt Elling. While there are plenty of clever jazz lads around with noble ambition, none show any sign of trumping (or even echoing) Elling's kaleidoscopic amalgam of gifts."

DEDICATED TO YOU: KURT ELLING SINGS THE MUSIC OF COLTRANE AND HARTMAN, 2009 (Concord), was recorded live at Lincoln Center, and was a showcase for Elling at his most expansive. The concert was built on arrangements created by long-time collaborator Hobgood for voice, rhythm section, the Ethel Quartet and tenor saxophonist Ernie Watts. Released in June 2009, the recording was praised by *Billboard* as "a moving tribute to legends lost and a portrait of a gifted artist in his own right at the peak of his creative powers." The *BBC* declared, "Elling is just as engaging and creative working with standards as he is when he's turning a Walt Whitman poem into vocal art." Following Grammy nominations for every record made as a leader, Elling finally received a Grammy in the "Best Jazz Vocal Album" category.

THE GATE, 2011 (Concord). Produced by the legendary Don Was (The Rolling Stones, Bonnie Raitt, Bob Dylan), the record featured interpretations of songs by The Beatles, Herbie Hancock, Miles Davies, and Stevie Wonder. Nate Chinen's *JazzTimes* cover article on Elling called the recording "luminous" and "a splendid representation of Elling's art at its leanest, its most expressively distilled." And *USA Today* called the record "further proof that Kurt Elling is the best singer of his generation." *The Gate* marked Elling's ninth consecutive Grammy nomination.

1619 BROADWAY – THE BRILL BUILDING PROJECT, 2012 (Concord). This recording, also Grammy nominated, honored and celebrated the locale that the London Telegraph called "the most important generator of popular songs in the Western world." Elling's interpretations and signature arrangements of songs like "On Broadway," "A House Is Not A Home" and "So Far Away" made this another unexpected step, guaranteed to further solidify his reputation for thrilling innovation and superb craftsmanship. *All About Jazz* declared, "Kurt Elling has few peers in the realm of male jazz vocals where sheer inventiveness and muscularity are concerned. He further establishes himself as the preeminent vocalist with the ambitious and successful *1619 Broadway: The Brill Building Project*."

PASSION WORLD, 2015 (Concord). Once again, Kurt Elling charted new territory in his most "worldly" album to date. He cast his net far and wide, from Brazil to Ireland, Germany to France, Scotland to Cuba to Iceland in a recording all about "passions"—the forces that shake our souls. As one of the busiest touring jazz artists, Elling encountered the varied musical expressions of love, romance, and heartbreak around the world; he observed how the same depth of feeling is shaped differently by each culture through which it is filtered. The result was an album vibrant with diversity and variety, and at the same time a singular celebration of what makes us all human. In terms of its conceptual scope, breadth of influences, and inspired musical collaborations, *Passion World* was the most ambitious project yet from the preeminent male vocalist in jazz.

THE BEAUTIFUL DAY, 2016 (OKeh/Sony). On *The Beautiful Day: Kurt Elling Sings Christmas*, his first recording for OKeh Records/Sony Music Masterworks, Elling embraced the meaning and spirit of Christmas, celebrating the promise and magic of the season that touches people of all faiths and beliefs. Inventive and fresh, *The Beautiful Day* reimagined the sounds of Christmas, mixing traditional carols decked out in new arrangements with songs that were revelations and rediscovered treats. He wrapped the universal themes of hope, light, wonder,

mystery, and goodwill in musical packages full of delightful surprises. Elling said, “I knew I didn’t want to make a ‘religious’ record, just as I knew I didn’t want to make a standard, swingin’ jazzy Christmas. I’m trying to expand my consciousness and embrace the goodness of the season, and I want to include everybody. For me, Christmas is a time of consideration, of pondering mysteries.” *The Beautiful Day* truly transcends Christmas.

—*Special Projects*—

In 1998, Elling undertook a critical, multi-dimensional exploration of the life and work of Beat poet Allen Ginsberg at Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre. The *Chicago Tribune* said, “Elling turned a fairly predictable survey of Beat Literature into a more balanced view of a key chapter in American history. Here was an evening of poetry and music informed by a sense of morality, as well as an aversion to politically correct points of view,” calling it “audacious...provocative.” This show was also mounted at The Kennedy Center, Philadelphia’s Annenberg Center, and at Ireland’s Galway Festival.

One year later Elling was commissioned to create an event fusing jazz and modern dance, this time featuring his wife, dancer Jennifer Elling. Said the *Chicago Sun-Times*, “Having risen as a jazz singer on the wings of modern poetry, including his own, Elling is in full thrall of art’s interactive possibilities.” The *Chicago Tribune* proclaimed, “Because spoken word, subtle lighting design, fluid stage direction and a heady spirit of improvisation all play key roles, the evening touches on more aesthetic forms than one generally encounters in a week’s worth of concert going. It’s difficult to single out highlights.”

As a result of the foregoing, The City of Chicago commissioned Elling to write, direct, perform in, and host a major event for its millennial celebration. Elling’s production, “This Is Our Music, These Are Our People,” featured blues great Buddy Guy, the late author and historian Studs Terkel, word jazz artist Ken Nordine, saxophonist Von Freeman, poet Gwendolyn Brooks, members of the Joffrey Ballet, Ed Paschke’s and Tony Fitzpatrick’s visual art, and a ninety-voice gospel choir. The *Chicago Tribune* called the result “Stirring...magical.”

In 2001, Elling created another new work for the Steppenwolf Theatre. For this production, entitled “LA/CHI/NY,” he invited one poet and one musician from each of America’s three great cities to bring the sounds of their environments to the stage. The *Chicago Tribune* opined, “Elling might truly be able to change the way audiences think about jazz, poetry and life in America.”

The following year Elling produced the vocal summit “Four Brothers” at Chicago’s Park West Theater, which featured Elling, Mark Murphy, Kevin Mahogany, and Jon Hendricks. A cross-generational tribute to the art of singing jazz, “Four Brothers” toured Europe and the U.S. in 2003-04 to much acclaim. A final blowout performance in the summer of 2005 occurred in Chicago’s Millennium Park—a concert which featured Sheila Jordan in the fourth spot and was aptly named “Three Brotha’s and a Motha.”

In 2004, Elling was invited to perform and record a groundbreaking work by pianist and composer Fred Hersch, who created a song cycle based on words from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, rendered by a ten-piece chamber jazz ensemble with vocal performances by Elling and Kate McGarry.

In 2006, as Artist-in-Residence at the 49th annual Monterey Jazz Festival, Elling teamed up with composer/bassist John Clayton to create “Red Man/Black Man.” Here Elling juxtaposed his own writing with the works of Native American poets—most notably Maurice Kenny and, once again, the late Pulitzer Prize winner Gwendolyn Brooks—in a musical setting that featured the Clayton/Hamilton Orchestra.

In addition to his work as an artist, Kurt Elling served as a National Trustee for the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS) beginning in 1999, and he was later elected Vice Chair of the 17,000-member service organization. While Vice Chairman, Elling helped create and hosted the first two annual Recording Academy Salutes to Jazz and oversaw the creation of the Academy's Lifetime Achievement and Trustees Awards Review Committee.

In 2004 Kurt Elling was elected to join the Illinois Delegation to the Democratic National Convention as a John Kerry Delegate. Elling also acted as Master of Ceremonies at a jazz-oriented "Fundraiser for Change" in 2008 at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan, which featured Roy Haynes, Brad Mehldau, Dianne Reeves, Jeff "Tain" Watts, Charlie Hunter, Roy Hargrove and others.

In 2009 Elling gave a command performance at The White House for President Obama's first state dinner, where Elling was accompanied by the National Symphony Orchestra conducted by the late Marvin Hamlisch.

In 2016 Elling performed again at The White House in the fifth International JazzDay concert, hosted by President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama.

In recent years Kurt Elling has toured vigorously, with trips to Europe, Australia and New Zealand, Japan, South Africa, and across North America filling his calendar. In that time he has led his own ensemble and has collaborated with many of the world's finest orchestras and big bands. A sampling includes the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra, the WDR Big Band & Orchestra (Germany), the Guy Barker Big Band & BBC Concert Orchestra (London), the Metropole Orchestra (Netherlands), and the Aarhus Jazz Orchestra (Denmark).

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