

# CONCORD **BIOGRAPHY**

MUSIC GROUP, INC.

## **Kurt Elling**

### **Dedicated to You:**

#### **Kurt Elling Sings the Music of Coltrane and Hartman**

Kurt Elling has never hesitated to take on a musical challenge. He has, in fact, reveled in the opportunity to hone his skills while exploring new creative territories. From the creation of multi-disciplinary new works for the Steppenwolf Theatre to his Four Brothers collaboration with Jon Hendricks, Mark Murphy and Kevin Mahogany, from his epic vocalese versions of John Coltrane's "Resolution" or Dexter Gordon's "Body and Soul" to his creation and direction of a commissioned two-hour extravaganza for the City of Chicago's millennial celebrations, Elling has applied his remarkable creativity to one intriguing, often demanding, project after another. But none has been more daunting than his new Concord recording, "Dedicated to You: Kurt Elling Sings the Music of Coltrane and Hartman."

It all began in his home town "as an idea suggested by my friends at the Chicago Jazz Festival," recalls Elling. "They gave me a call and asked me essentially to reiterate the John Coltrane/Johnny Hartman material for a bill they were planning. I'm always happy to have an idea like that. But it didn't interest me quite as much to simply reiterate the material. So I asked if I could do it my own way."

Few knowledgeable jazz folks would even consider denying Kurt Elling the opportunity to "do it my own way." And his Chicago Jazz Festival friends were obviously not among that unenlightened group. So the project went forward, through a variety of manifestations and locations – at Chicago's Symphony Center, Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall, the Main Stage at the Monterey Jazz Festival and various performances around the country.

But, as the program morphed through various phases and musical alliances, eventually gathering and deploying the first-rate team that plays on this recording - including the great Ernie Watts on tenor saxophone and the string quartet known as "ETHEL" – one aspect remained consistent: Elling's desire to place the music in the setting of a string quartet, first with acoustic bass, and later with a complete jazz trio led by his long-time musical companion, pianist Laurence Hobgood, who also provided most of the arrangements which propel this record. Jim Gailloreto's arrangements grace "My One and Only Love" and "Nancy With the Laughing Face."

The recording, says Elling, "has evolved considerably from what it started with at

Symphony Center. What we have now is a very different thing. We wanted to honor the original arrangements, but not be bound by them. It was important for us to recast a number of things, so that we could present the entirety of it with a fresh shine. Jazz people take history so seriously, and that's beautiful. But I believe that history speaks to us, informs us and should also inspire us. Of course, it's (collaborator) Laurence Hobgood's arrangements that really drive the whole experience."

He is also quick to acknowledge the significance of the project's starting point. "When you hear any of those great masters – like Coltrane – and realize the incredible gift from God that is given to those people, you can't overstate their importance to the jazz world, to the world in general. And we were very much aware of that fact as we put all this together."

Recorded on January 21, 2009 in Manhattan as part of Lincoln Center's American Songbook series, the album packs the best of the live performance into twelve tracks bursting with a stunning spectrum of music, both vocal and instrumental. It opens with an introductory rendering of the American Songbook classic, "All or Nothing At All," in which the interconnectedness between Elling's vocal and Watt's tenor saxophone calls up immediate references to the Coltrane/Hartman source.

It is the second track, however, that sets the stage for the balance of the recording. It begins with a laid-back, floating exposition of the standard tune, "It's Easy To Remember," creating an atmospheric setting for Elling's description of the original Coltrane/Harman recording.

"A poetic jazz memory," says Elling. "It's March of 1963. In mid-morning New Jersey, two musicians drive through the snow-bound suburban landscape on their way to a recording session. One, an intensely dedicated musical explorer, has been of late studying the way singers breathe and hopes he will hear Frank Sinatra on the radio so he can consider one more notion....The other, an experienced song stylist, wonders whether he'll ever hear his own voice over the airwaves."

Elling goes on, telling more about the seemingly random recording session that produced one of jazz history's most memorable collections of songs. He describes how the participants – John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman – had met just a week earlier, played only a few pieces together informally, how they had no charts, had made no formal musical arrangements, or even had a real rehearsal, as such. It's a compelling story, and Elling describes it with the articulateness of the poet he is, noting that one of the album's most memorable tunes – "Lush Life" – was included because Coltrane and Hartman heard Nat Cole singing it on the car radio as they drove to the session. And he also adds the remarkable fact that – despite the almost utter lack of preparation – all the songs on the session, except one, were completed in single takes.

In Elling's case, recording his transformative interpretations in a live concert afforded a

similarly spontaneous setting, and that sense of vivid aliveness courses through every track. “All Or Nothing At All,” “Autumn Serenade,” “Nancy With the Laughing Face” and “You Are Too Beautiful” are, plain and simple, definitive examples of how to remain true to the inner essence of a song. His rendering of Billy Strayhorn’s “Lush Life” is a stunning display of evocative musical story telling – listen to the cry he utters after the line “Then you came along with your siren song, to tempt me to madness.” Shifting gears on “They Say That Falling In Love Is Wonderful,” he uncoils a jaunty romp through the tune, delightfully referenced with Sinatra and Fitzgerald rhythmic imagery.

Other tracks place Elling’s voice in stirring textures of sound from the ETHEL Quartet: a floating rendition of “Dedicated To You” – a song associated with the duo of Billy Eckstine and Sarah Vaughan, as well as Coltrane and Hartman – sung over turbulent strings; the lovely positioning of the vocal over the contrapuntal quartet lines of “Say It Over and Over”; the atmospheric blend of voice and string quartet alone amid the piquant dissonances of Jim Gailloro’s arrangement of “My One and Only Love.”

“There’s a wide spectrum of possibilities in how to deliver a song,” notes Elling. “And with Johnny Hartman, who wasn’t a real improviser, it was a matter of finding the emotional content with his phrasing and his sound. All jazz singers deal with matters of greater complexity and greater simplification over the course of their careers. For me, I tend to want to shake things up, but sometimes – like Hartman – you have to have respect for the moment, and just sing the song.”

On the sole instrumental number, Watts finds the Coltrane heartbeat of “What’s New” and uses it to energize his own soaring creativity. On other songs – “Autumn Serenade,” “Say It Over and Over,” “Nancy With the Laughing Face” and a final fiery burst of irresistible passion on “You Are Too Beautiful” – voice and tenor saxophone travel their musical journey side by side.

Elling’s wildly eclectic career, roving freely across vocalese, transformed instrumental music, tunes from the Great American Songbook, poetry, theatre, dance and more has generated extraordinary successes and garnered numerous awards. Among them – eight Grammy nominations, top spot placement in the Down Beat Critics’ and Jazz Times Readers’ polls, four Jazz Journalists Association wins for Best Male Vocalist and the Prix Billie Holiday from the Academe du Jazz in Paris.

But Elling’s determined musical adventuring, his persistent desire to open new creative vistas have also occasionally aroused the age old arguments questioning the very nature, the very identity of jazz singing – arguments for which almost all jazz fans have their own answers.

Still, it may be, even now, that there is a hermit, living somewhere in the mountains of Azerbaijan, who *doesn’t* have an opinion about what good jazz singing is or isn’t. And it’s a fair bet that if he were roused out of his cave long enough to hear the tracks on

“Dedicated To You: Kurt Elling Sings the Music of Coltrane and Hartman,” he’d listen intently, grunt a few times, nod happily, and say “Hey, man, that’s the real deal.”

Because, ultimately, as Duke Ellington once famously remarked – “There’s only good music and bad music.” And -- in their quest to bring new musical blossoms from the seed beds of John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman – the inspired grouping of Kurt Elling, Ernie Watts, the Laurence Hobgood Trio and ETHEL, have definitely made some very, very good music.

- Don Heckman