

DUCHESS

Amy Cervini, Hilary Gardner & Melissa Stylianou

“Three fine singers – Amy Cervini, Hilary Gardner and Melissa Stylianou – join in swinging harmony to whip up music that traffics in delight. Referencing vocal icons from Peggy Lee to the Boswell Sisters, this fresh-voiced triumvirate plays it straight from the heart, leaving any trace of camp or postmodern irony at the door.” — The New Yorker

A trio of vocal entertainers blending the classic and the contemporary, Duchess has charmed audiences far and wide with its beautiful musicianship and big fun at the group's shows of “girl-on-girl harmony,” as the three so saucily put it. Or as the *Wall Street Journal* said: “They understand that swinging music goes hand in hand with an audacious sense of humor.” The New York-based threesome of Amy Cervini, Hilary Gardner and Melissa Stylianou channel the inspiration of vintage jazz vocal trios into an entertaining package that's utterly up-to-date, marked as it is by evergreen swing, sweet-toned harmonies and a stage presence that has proved irresistible to audiences from coast to coast, as well as across Canada and even in Israel. *DownBeat* dubbed the trio “a beacon of jovial esprit,” while *New York City Jazz Record* praised Duchess's live performances for their “spot-on harmonies,” the singers “phrasing seamlessly like a big-band horn section.” Anzic Records will release the trio's second album, *Laughing at Life*, on Feb. 10, 2017, of which *Downbeat Magazine* said: “For a good time, call Duchess.”

Laughing at Life was produced by arranger Oded Lev-Ari, who also helmed *Duchess* as well as acclaimed Anzic solo releases by Cervini and Stylianou (as well as Anat Cohen and The 3 Cohens). The new album features beloved songs by Cole Porter, Johnny Mercer, Duke Ellington and Ray Charles, plus a brace of lesser-known numbers given the infectious Duchess spin. The singers are joined by a rhythm section of pianist Michael Cabe, bassist Matt Aronoff and drummer Jared Schonig, along with saxophonist Jeff Lederer and guitarist Jesse Lewis. The album also features two kindred-spirit guest stars: Anat Cohen (clarinet) and Wycliffe Gordon (trombone, vocals). Highlights include a finger-snapping take on the famous Billie Holiday/Count Basie number “Swing Brother Swing!” The band grooves beautifully behind the singers in “On the Sunny Side of the Street,” while Cole Porter's ballad “Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye” comes to life thanks to the sheer purity of the Duchess vocal weave. Inspired from the start by virtuosic 1930s trio the Boswell Sisters, Duchess also presents the previously unrecorded “Dawn,” a mellifluous song co-written decades ago by Vet Boswell (youngest of the Boswell Sisters). As a big fan of Duchess and its updating of the Boswells sound, Vet's granddaughter even sent the trio stage gloves worn by the sisters.

The Boswell Sisters, from New Orleans, made pioneering close-harmony records for Brunswick in the Thirties that remain a prize in the jazz canon. “The Boswell Sisters were such originals,” Gardner explains. “This kind of music got more conservative in the 1940s, with the Andrews Sisters taking the vocal trio format more mainstream, even though they were swinging and super-tight in their own way. But the Boswell Sisters had a kind of instrumental approach to harmony singing, and there was a wildness to what they did, with abrupt tempo changes, crazy harmonies and ensemble scatting as if they were singing from one brain. We love them. That said, we're not doing re-creations at all. Our voices, personalities and 21st-century sensibilities help impart individuality to what we're doing. We're making these songs our own, naturally.”

Laughing at Life features “Everybody Loves My Baby” (a popular number for the Boswells in 1932), with Anat Cohen threading curlicues of clarinet through the track. Wycliffe Gordon contributes textured trombone and vocal to his ravishing arrangement of Duke Ellington’s “Creole Love Call.” The album also includes a nod to the Andrews Sisters in Johnny Mercer’s “Strip Polka,” with a burlesque-worthy sax solo by Jeff Lederer. The disc makes room for solo spots by each of the Duchess ladies, with Cervini taking the lead on Cole Porter’s sweetly risqué “Give Him the Oo La La,” Stylianou on Broadway-via-Carmen McRae number “Where Would You Be Without Me?” and Gardner on Peggy Lee’s customization of an iconic Ray Charles tune as “Hallelujah, I Love Him So.”

Recalling how Duchess first got together, Gardner says: “Melissa and I had each sung with Amy in various situations, developing a real rapport with her. Amy has also led duet nights at New York’s 55 Bar with a wide range of singers, and those nights there in the Village are so fearless and fun, with that spirit helping inform Duchess. The three of us teamed initially to sing some Boswell Sisters and Andrews Sisters charts at the 55 Bar, and it went over amazingly well. We were also Matt Wilson’s backing choir for his Christmas Tree-O project at the Jazz Standard – and, again, it just went over so well. It was a blast for us and the audience.” Cervini points out that it was Lev-Ari who had the bright notion that the three women sing together, adding: “I know I’m biased seeing as he’s my husband, but he really does have some great ideas! It went so well when we sang those stock Boswell Sisters and Andrew Sisters charts that he was inspired to write custom arrangements for us. His arrangements are tailored for our voices, with this imaginative conversation between the history of this sort of music and our individual, contemporary sensibilities.”

As “Charlie” to their “Angels,” Lev-Ari has since honed his arranging for Duchess, armed with the group’s ever-increasing rapport. “It’s true that my arrangements for the trio have this playful correspondence with history of the music and the sound of the Boswell Sisters and others,” the producer says. “Also, there is a tradition in big-band composition – particularly with Duke Ellington – that emphasizes writing for the individual playing the instrument, not necessarily for the instrument itself. Getting to know the three voices and their range of colors has allowed me to do that with Duchess. I can hear what a specific note would sound like when Melissa sings it versus Amy or Hilary. Duchess has also become like this collective musical brain, a vocal Hydra. They’re so in tune with one another that it allows us to explore and experiment even while maintaining that great sound and vibe.”

For their debut album, *Duchess*, the trio had a studio crew including Cabe, Lederer and Lewis, along with bassist Paul Sikivie and drummer Matt Wilson. The songs of *Duchess* range from the Peggy Lee number “I Love Being Here With You” and Johnny Mercer’s “P.S. I Love You” to new twists on “Que Sera, Sera” and the indelible standard “I’ll Be Seeing You.” There’s a playful Gershwin rarity with “Blah, Blah, Blah” and a direct Boswell Sisters homage with their arrangement of “Heebie Jeebies.” And there are solo spots for each singer: “My Brooklyn Love Song” (Gardner), “A Doodlin’ Song” (Cervini) and “Humming to Myself” (Stylianou). It is songs like these that have won hearts as Duchess has performed from New York to New Orleans and beyond.

In their hometown of New York City, Duchess has performed multiple times at the Jazz Standard and Dizzy’s Club Coca-Cola (in the Jazz at Lincoln Center complex), as well as long residencies at their home club of Greenwich Village’s 55 Bar and elsewhere. Touring Canada, Duchess gave a performance reviewed by *Ottawa Jazz Scene*: “There was a time when jazz didn’t take itself too seriously. You went to a jazz show to have fun, dance, get

cheered up. The vocal trio Duchess – Amy Cervini, Hilary Gardner, Melissa Stylianou – did its damndest to bring back that era at its Ottawa Jazz Festival concert. Supported by a strong rhythm section, they sang cheerful jazz standards in tight harmony, in a show that was very easy to enjoy.”

Duchess even brought the house down in New Orleans, native ground for the Boswell Sisters sound. The group was invited to the Crescent City to participate in a celebration of the Boswell Sisters by Kyla Titus, a granddaughter of one of the sisters and who runs an association for preserving their music. Stylianou recalls: “Groups specializing in Boswell Sisters material from all over the world went down for the event. It was amazing how well they could do that music note-for-note. We only do a handful of numbers from the Boswell Sisters repertoire – we’re more inspired by the spirit than the letter. But when we sang at Snug Harbor down there, people were so into it. I think they appreciated this tongue-in-cheek, slightly down-and-dirty thing we have going on.”

About the magical stage rapport among the three singers, Cervini adds: “The chemistry with the three of us was special from the beginning – the sort of chemistry you can’t predict and that doesn’t happen very often. The audience response really did have a lot to do with us pursuing the group. People were having such a good time, bobbing their heads and dancing in their seats. Duchess is all about combining swinging with fun. There can be a fine line between entertaining and schtick, but we take care to fall on the right side of that. It’s serious fun, in that we take the music seriously but not ourselves.” And Stylianou shares a story about one of the best responses to the Duchess sound and sensibility: “It was from a musician, a vibes player who had a set after us at the 55 Bar. He came up to us and said, ‘You know, the audience doesn’t realize how difficult what you’re doing really is. They’re having too good of a time’.”

For more information on Duchess, including tour dates, music samples, photos, video, blog posts and more, go to www.duchesstrio.com.

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