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'S Wonderful: Perry Beekman Sings and Plays Gershwin (Self Produced)

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PERRY BEEKMAN (VOCALS AND GUITAR), PETER TOMLINSON (PIANO), LOU PAPPAS (BASS)

For the third part of his continued quest to fully explore the *Great American Songbook*, the remarkable guitarist/vocalist Perry Beekman embraces George and Ira Gershwin with the very aptly titled *'S Wonderful*. Following up on the critical and popular success of the first two albums in the series – *Bewitched* (Rodgers & Hart) and *So in Love* (Cole Porter) – Perry and his longtime associates, pianist Peter Tomlinson and Lou Pappas on bass, offer 15 of the Gershwins' best loved classics.

With each new recording project and the prolific live performing schedule they maintain, the trio's synergy and unity of purpose become increasingly apparent. The sheer joy and the sparkling sense of discovery they exhibit in playing together has never been more palpable than on this album.

The easygoing and joyous nature of the music almost obscures the sophistication and inventiveness of Perry's brilliant arrangements, which perfectly frame these familiar songs. While remaining totally faithful to the composers' visions, they provide a freshness and flair that makes them new again. One of the most captivating elements of the arrangements is the creation of written improvisational lines and chordal passages played in unison by guitar and piano that link the imaginative solos with the return to the theme on a number of tracks. The effect is exhilarating and further enhances the constant lyricism in the solos, tying them in even more seamlessly with the unforgettable melodies.

Perry always cites the enormous influence that the immortal Nat 'King' Cole has had upon both his music and his singing. The former is manifested in the use of the master's guitar/piano/bass format – a constant in Perry's live performances and all his recordings. As for the singing, while Perry's dulcet voice is not like Nat's (although in the lower tones that sound of liquid velvet is manifested), his impeccable phrasing and flawless intonation both hold true to the great man's style.

Instrumentally, Perry's consummate guitar artistry is consistently on display, but so perfectly entwined with the songs that his virtuosity is understated. The fluidity of the Barney Kessel/Herb Ellis style of swing; the blazing Johnny Smith-tinged runs and that Grant Green soulfulness are all inextricably coiled into the music. Tomlinson's mastery is a perfect complement to Perry's, his solos consistently inspired and their interplay always exemplary, while Pappas' deeply wooded tone, rhythmic vibrancy and consistently tasteful musicality provide the core to every piece.

There's something about the way that Perry sings the lyrics that also calls to mind the man whose name was on George Gershwin's lips as his last utterance – Fred Astaire. Like Astaire – a vastly underrated vocalist – Perry's delivery of Ira's wonderful lyrics allows them to tell the story on their own, unobscured by stylish invention for its own sake. And his guitar and vocals are so symbiotic that they resemble the right and left hand of a pianist in their singularity of purpose.

The 15 songs contained here are all staples of the majestic Gershwin legacy, but of course only a small part of it – a further reminder of the depth and scope of the prolific composer's output in his tragically short life. Many of them have been played by jazz artists for more than 75 years; and many more have been adapted into now-classic jazz originals – none more often than *I Got Rhythm*. Here Perry offers his own variation, slotted into the innards of his faithful rendition with one of those aforementioned

guitar/piano unison items. A somewhat ironic atmospheric rubato intro sets up this unabashedly swinging version, also marked by his beautifully constructed solo.

On another rhythm note, *Fascinating Rhythm* is one of two instrumentals, treated with almost jump-style buoyancy, with fluid guitar and piano solos, and a lively trading of fours with the bass, all further stoked by some of Perry's guitar body "conga" percussion. *But Not for Me* features a nicely suspended version of the winsome melody and a guitar solo that covers the full range of the instrument.

It's just voice and guitar on *I've Got a Crush on You*, featuring a highly compelling chord melody arrangement followed by a poignant vocal interpretation. Beautiful balladry is on tap for two more pieces. *How Long Has This Been Going On* lets Perry demonstrate that low-range Nat-like silkiness with his touching vocal. *Someone to Watch Over Me* includes its often-ignored intro, used here to build a tantalizing tension before Perry offers the utterly gorgeous melody, stretching his tones languorously along the bridge. A beautifully delicate piano solo is another highlight on this highly emotive and deeply moving piece.

In true tribute to the Gershwins, Perry includes intros on three other pieces as well, both in a talking/singing style. *Nice Work If You Can Get It* talks its way into a bluesy groove, with baroque unison lines punctuating a soulful guitar solo, the piano flirting with barrelhouse and a nicely rhythmic bass solo over Freddie Green-ish comping. *Love is Here to Stay* follows the intro with an easy swinging vocal over a walking bass before joined by deep blue piano. Perry's subtly deliberate solo is rooted in potent chordal style; and Peter's blues-drenched turn follows a similar route. The intro to *Let's Call the Whole Thing Off* transforms the whimsical piece into a playful jaunt, with a spirited angular guitar solo.

Whimsy of a more classical sort is heard on *Oh Lady Be Good*, with a quote from *Rhapsody in Blue* rolled into the introduction, and a fresh take on the chord structure with a touch of big band sound. Audaciousness is at play on *'S Wonderful*, with its bossa feel, bold suspensions and daringly elongated rhythms on the head; and features a crystalline guitar solo that falls like a gentle rain.

Undiluted swing is the recipe for the other four pieces. *Liza* is in a punchy, vigorous mood featuring an articulately melodious guitar solo. *Love Walked In* struts in an easy but emphatic gait with Perry in glowing single note runs on the first chorus and cascades on the second. *Soon* is a surging kicker, with briskly punctuated vocal, a fiery guitar solo and smoking piano (with some more "conga" accompaniment); and *They All Laughed* is an infectiously buoyant jaunt with a terrific guitar solo that blends blistering runs with deliciously suspended chords, and Tomlinson cooking in Teddy Wilson swing fashion.

With the huge Gershwin repertoire, one can only hope that this album is a volume one, as there's really just one way to properly describe it: *'S Wonderful*.

For more information visit www.perrybeekman.com

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