

BIOGRAPHY

CURTIS STIGERS

Lost in Dreams

For two decades, Curtis Stigers has demonstrated time and again that the lines between jazz, pop, soul, rock, blues and even country are not as clearly defined as they may seem. In a trajectory that began with pop/soul albums in the early '90s, the vocalist-saxophonist-songwriter has spent the past several years cementing his reputation as a formidable jazz singer – one who recognizes the value of the story within the song, and the countless ways in which that story can be told.

“One of the great joys of what I do is being able to hear past the common perceptions about songs – based on a well known original recording or a classic arrangement – and get right to the issue of whether it’s a great song or not,” Stigers explains. “In the end, it’s a matter of answering some simple questions. Is it honest? Is it real? Is it emotional? If all those basic elements are there, it’s amazing how easily some very disparate songs can fit together.”

The answers to these simple questions are clearly in the affirmative on *Lost in Dreams*, Stigers’ new CD on Concord Records set for release on September 29, 2009. Mixing his own material with a few well known standards – and then tossing in curve balls from sources as diverse as Rodgers and Hart, Annie Lennox and Roger Waters – Stigers creates a surprising whole that is clearly greater the sum of its parts. His brand of jazz includes generous doses of soul, pop, blues and a host of other shades too subtle and elusive to grasp, yet too clever and original to ignore.

“When I started talking about making this record,” says Stigers, “a lot of people were telling me, ‘We love that you do these modern songs as jazz tunes, and we love the way you’re really pushing the envelope in that regard, but it would be really great to hear you sing standards. So I decided I would just do it. And not only would I make an album of standards, but I’d do the most obvious, overdone standards. I’d do the ones I said I have hesitated to record because they’ve been done so many times, or the perfect version has been done already.’”

Predictable and safe? Hardly. One look at the songwriting credits on *Lost in Dreams* tells the tale. Alongside standards like “My Funny Valentine,” “Bye Bye Blackbird” and “In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning” are jazz renditions of Annie Lennox’s “Cold,” Ron Sexsmith’s “Reason for Our Love” and John Lennon’s “Jealous Guy.”

“As the album of standards was coming together, I started falling back into my old habits,” Stigers laughs. “I love the idea of finding songs by modern composers and modern singer-songwriters – songs that no one ever thought of interpreting in a different way – and then doing just that. Very seldom do people hear a song by John Lennon and say, ‘Hey, that could be a really swinging jazz tune if it were done a different way.’”

A couple members of the *Lost in Dreams* supporting cast – keyboardist Matthew Fries and drummer Keith Hall – are players with whom Stigers has worked consistently over the past eight years. Bassist Cliff Schmitt is a relative newcomer, but overall, the team has evolved into something more cohesive than merely a group of musicians. “We’ve really become a band,” says Stigers. “I really hate playing without them, quite frankly. There’s something about this group of people that really works.”

The album is co-produced and arranged by John “Scrapper” Sneider, who replaces Stigers’ longtime co-producer and arranger Larry Goldings (although Goldings does share a song credit with Stigers on “The Dreams of Yesterday”). Sneider also lends a hand on trumpet, glockenspiel and vibes.

Lost in Dreams is the latest chapter in a career that can only be described as a musical odyssey – an adventure with more than the usual share of twists and turns, and even a few perils. Born and raised in Boise, Idaho, Stigers spent his grade school years studying clarinet and saxophone – two instruments that awakened his jazz sensibilities at an early age. During his teenage years and beyond, he often sat in with legendary jazz pianist Gene Harris, who held weekly jam sessions at a local club in Boise. “I would go down on Tuesday nights and sit in with Gene,” he recalls. “I had a jazz group that I played with back then, and we sort of became his pet project. He would help us get gigs around town and enthusiastically encourage us to keep growing and exploring the music and our talents. Playing sax and clarinet with Gene is one of the main reasons I’m a jazz musician now.”

But coming of age in the ‘70s and ‘80s, Stigers was also immersed in the prevailing punk rock and new wave aesthetic of the day. Bands like the Sex Pistols, The Police and the Clash were just as much a part of his musical consciousness as Miles Davis, Sarah Vaughan, Dave Brubeck and other jazz icons.

It’s no surprise, then, that the circumstances surrounding his first records were marked by confusion between artist and label about creative direction. His self-titled debut album on Arista in 1991 was a straight-ahead pop album that sold 1.5 million copies worldwide, thanks to several hit singles and numerous appearances on the talk show circuit. In addition to tours with Eric Clapton, Elton John and Bonnie Raitt, and Tonight Show and Letterman appearances, Stigers recorded a track for the wildly successful soundtrack to the Whitney Houston film “The Bodyguard.” When his second studio effort started leaning toward roots rock, the label resisted. A three-year battle ensued, and when his second album was released the pop world had moved on and the disc was a commercial disappointment. Relations grew worse when his third album turned in a jazz direction. After another stalemate, Stigers took his unreleased jazz record and left Arista in 1997.

Around this time, Stigers had begun to branch into a variety of musical directions. He reconnected with his jazz roots via a series of performances in Denmark. He also indulged an emerging singer-songwriter muse by playing a few acoustic shows at The Bottom Line and making guest appearances on records by Jules Shear, Julia Fordham, Al Green and Suzzzy Roche, and in concert with Carole King, Paul Brady and the Allman Brothers Band. “I wanted to be Loudon Wainwright meets John Hiatt,” Stigers admits.

He eventually signed with Columbia, where he released a third pop album, *Brighter Days*, in 1999. “I was really proud of that record. It was more organic sounding, more like a rocking singer/songwriter album, but about eight people bought it, and one of them was my mom,” he jokes. He left Columbia after *Brighter Days*, once again taking his unreleased jazz record with him.

During session work as a guest vocalist on one of Gene Harris’ last records, Stigers met Concord exec and producer John Burk, who offered to release the orphaned jazz record. “And that was the beginning of my jazz recording career,” says Stigers. “That was *Baby Plays Around*, (named after an Elvis Costello tune on it), my first record on Concord, released in 2000. I’d recorded it four years earlier, and it had just sat in the can all that time, waiting for the right time, waiting for me to realize that this was what I was best at, and what I was supposed to be doing.”

Baby Plays Around was followed by four more albums on Concord: *Secret Heart* (2002), *You Inspire Me* (2003), *I Think It’s Going To Rain Today* (2005) and *Real Emotional* (2007). Each outing has taken increasingly bold steps toward juxtaposing material that might otherwise seem incongruous, cutting to the heart of the story within each song and retelling it in a jazz context.

Lost in Dreams is another of those bold steps, beginning with “Cold,” a tune by Annie Lennox from her first solo album, *Diva*. “I’ve loved that song since I first heard it,” says Stigers, who admits to some hesitation about setting it up as the lead-off track. “I felt like maybe it was a little too intense for that, or a little too aggressive or too arty whatever. But the more I listened to it, the more I thought that it set the perfect tone for the record overall. It’s so many different types of music boiled down into a single song. There’s pop and there’s soul and blues, but at the same time, it clearly is a jazz recording.”

“You’ve Got the Fever” is a collaboration between Stigers and a unknown songwriter and bassist from Boise named Tom Jensen. “It’s the first time he’s had a song on a major label recording,” says Stigers. “The first time I heard him play it with his trio, I thought, ‘This has to be some famous Brazilian tune,’ but it was one of his melodies. I’m happy with the lyric that I came up with. It’s very funny, and a bit naughty, too.”

The medley of Roger Waters’ “Vera” (from Pink Floyd’s landmark 1979 album, *The Wall*) and the World War II standard “We’ll Meet Again” is not as odd a pairing as it might initially seem. The Vera in Waters’ song is Vera Lynn, who recorded “We’ll Meet Again” in the 1940s. Stigers finally made the connection in 1995, when he was in England during the 50th anniversary of V-E Day. “I thought, ‘God, wouldn’t it be cool to put these two songs together,’” he says. “I filed the idea away, and then I brought it up with Scrapper when we were talking about songs for this record. His eyes lit up and he said, ‘That’s perfect. What a great idea.’”

Stigers’ jazz-pop hybrid rendition of John Lennon’s “Jealous Guy” came together in the studio after trying a variety of approaches with the band. “After a while, we found a groove that was somewhere between Herbie Hancock from the mid-‘60s and a pop tune,” he says. “Granted, there’s great chasm in between those two styles, but somehow we managed to pull it off. I sort of just sing the song like a soul singer, and the band just sort of swirls around me.”

The rollicking “Daddy’s Coming Home,” co-written with “Scrapper,” is a free-for-all with a lyric that Stigers wrote primarily for his nine-year-old daughter, Ruby. “We just went after that vibe to make it sound like a party, like a madhouse,” he says. “The work that I do requires that I sometimes spend a lot of time away from my daughter, so I wanted to write a song to say how much I enjoy coming home to her.”

The set closes with “In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning,” a gut-wrenching but enduring classic, no matter the singer. “It’s such a perfect song,” says Stigers. “Every word of it holds so much importance. Every line is just a killer. When I hear Sinatra’s version of it, it’s just so heartbreaking. It’ll always be Sinatra’s song, of course, but in the end, I just tried to make it my own. Scrapper wrote such a beautiful, elegant arrangement. Once we had that, I knew I could find a way to not really worry about the Sinatra thing.”

Lost in Dreams is a compelling piece of work, but make no mistake about the title. Curtis Stigers knows exactly where he’s going and what he’s doing. Whether it’s a Sinatra classic, a chestnut from the prog rock era or one of his own compositions, he’s not afraid to peel away the layers of a good song and get at the core. It’s a process that never gets old, and one that offers limitless possibilities for interpretation.

“What I like about what I do for a living is that it’s never boring,” he says. “It’s always changing – from song to song, from gig to gig, from album to album. It’s always a surprise – not just to the audiences and the critics and the record company and the publicist, but to me too. Every time I sing a song, something in it surprises me. There’s always something I hear that’s new.”

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