

by Terry Teachout (column excerpt)
Washington Post, November 7, 2004

Wesla Whitfield, who sings standards better than anybody, set up shop at Danny's Skylight Room in NY for a three-night stand. Among other things, she's my favorite bait-and-switch artist. Just when her kewpie smile and lightly mocking patter leave you wondering whether she takes anything seriously, she comes zooming in under the radar with a payload of deeply felt emotion, singing songs like "This Time the Dream's on Me" and "Lost in the Stars" in a silvery drypoint voice that makes you shiver.

by Robert L. Daniels
Variety, May 25, 2004

Recalling youth and the first flush of love with Hoagy Carmichael's "The Nearness of You" and mining the subtle humor of Irving Berlin's "Cheek to Cheek," Wesla Whitfield pages through the great American songbook in her debut at Le Jazz Au Bar. The San Francisco diva, who's 57, laces her repertoire with an understated jazz sensibility. Her voice has a sweet, dry edge that seductively underscores her ballads and adds a tempting tease to her uptempo numbers. "I Wish I Knew," the tune by Mack Gordon and Harry Warren that found crooner Dick Haymes wooing Betty Grable in "Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe," is taken at a refreshingly sprightly tempo. Whitfield invests the phrase "Did I mistake this for a real romance?" with a wry questionable twinkle in her eye. With her adventurous take on Stephen Sondheim's "Everybody Says Don't," Whitfield "tilts the windmills" with flavorful finesse. A highlight of her hour reveals a kinship with the lyrics of E.Y. "Yip" Harburg, first as a romanticist propelled by "What Is There to Say" and "Then I'll Be Tired of You," followed by the uninhibited zaniness created for Groucho Marx with the encyclopedic "Lydia, the Tattooed Lady." Whitfield reveals a deliciously brittle and cutting sense of humor. She is accompanied on piano by her husband Mike Greensill, whose arrangements have an intrinsically light swinging base. In his zesty opening solo, Greensill played the Earl Fatha Hines classic "Rosetta." Boldly expressive, it was clearly a rhythmic mood setter. A generous portion of Whitfield's hour is beautifully captured on her new HighNote CD, "September Songs," which contrasts the outer space awe of "Lost in the Stars" with the wide-eyed snappy ardor of "Jeepers Creepers." There is a rare savory grace and elegance in a Whitfield performance. Her brief Gotham gig is much too brief, and she's worthy of a longer stay.

Whitfield Shines in Appearance with Peninsula Symphony

by Keith Kreitman
Oakland Tribune, January 20, 2004

She came as a guest and left as the belle of the ball. The Peninsula Symphony invited Wesla Whitfield to the Fox Theatre in Redwood City on Saturday to share in a program dedicated to the late George Gershwin, arguably the greatest American composer of the

past century. And Whitfield performed with such power and elegance that she simply overshadowed the host. From her very first note, it was obvious that this would be an exceptional concert. Her power over the stage and audience is similar to that of the late Broadway luminary Ethel Merman. But Whitfield is a much better singer. In fact, she even rivals her acknowledged role model, Rosemary Clooney. Accompanied by the 100-piece orchestra, as well as her husband, Mike Greensill, on piano, John Wiitala on the bass and Vince Lateano on drums, Whitfield enchanted, enraptured and mesmerized the audience not only with her music but also with her nuanced gestures and comments. In a string of tunes drawn from Gershwin and others, Whitfield displayed that same clarity of pitch and turn of phrase that made Frank Sinatra such a legend. Her emphasis on certain syllables made the melodies her own. From Gershwin, she sang such songs as "Our Love Is Here to Stay," "I've Got a Crush on You," "I've Got Rhythm," and was even able to turn that catchy show tune, "Nice Work if You Can Get It," into a romantic ballad. But she also did a knockout version of "Guys and Dolls," by Frank Loesser, and then segued into the wildly romantic classic "September Songs" by Kurt Weill. The orchestra accompanied the singer brilliantly in the second half of the program, but the first half faded by comparison.

Whitfield's Cool Phrasings Warm the Plush Room

by Joe Brown - San Francisco Chronicle Staff Writer,
Thursday, December 11, 2003

Wesla Whitfield is an indoor landmark. Every great city deserves a signature chanteuse, and San Francisco is fortunate to have Whitfield as its resident voice. Much like the city itself, Whitfield keeps an amused and affectionate eye on the glories of the past, while living entirely in the present. On Tuesday, the opening-night crowd for Whitfield's yearly monthlong stand at the York Hotel came gratefully out of the cold rain into the low-lit and glowing Plush Room, with its dark wood paneling and red velvet drapes and stained-glass ceiling, and ordered Irish coffees and other warming cocktails. Whitfield's arrival onstage warmed things up even further. A vivid, energetic presence with silvery pixie-cut hair, Whitfield was seated center stage and made eye contact with the audience as she began with a lyrical "But Beautiful." With an air of playful defiance, Whitfield has titled her latest show "Why Shouldn't I?," drawing songs from a list of 20-odd not-so-standards, most of them from the 1930s. Several of the tunes appear on her latest CD, "September Songs: The Music of Wilder, Weill and Warren," and if there's a story line here, it's love remembered from the vantage point of a certain age. But as Whitfield sings them, there's nothing regretful or even nostalgic about this material. A witty, creative interpreter with an easy charisma, Whitfield specializes in blowing the dust off songs that have suffered from overexposure and rough handling. She makes them glow again. She linked "I Only Have Eyes for You" and "Jeepers Creepers" with a wry bit of optical allusion. And where else are you likely to hear novelty numbers like "Lydia," (that would be the tattooed lady) and the giddy "Girlfriend of the Whirling Dervish"? (The latter includes the eternal rhyme "which of course she doesn't deservish.") A secondary theme of Whitfield's song selection is a delight in sheer songwriterly cleverness. Singing with

conversational clarity, adding little jazz flourishes, Whitfield reveled in a rush of wit and wordplay and made sure we caught every darn nuance and laugh line. A particular gem was Dave Frishberg's "Sports Pages" (the youngest song of this bunch, written in 1984), a paean to a section of the newspaper as a balm of certainty in uncertain times. As usual, she's perfectly partnered with Greensill and bassist John Wiitala. Greensill, who seemed to be enjoying himself immensely, is a subtle, economical pianist, with a crisp, rhythmic, even frisky style, and the piano he's using at the Plush has a wonderful tone. Wiitala has a fluid, melodic way with the stand-up bass, and added a particularly lovely bowed conclusion to "I See Your Face Before Me." Late in the show, Whitfield acknowledged her friend Paula West, another of this city's incandescent voices, who was sitting in the corner of the club. "Paula will be coming in (to the Plush Room) for a very long run after me," Whitfield said. "I'm just kind of a warm-up act for her." That's something to look forward to. Meanwhile, a cabaret evening spent with Whitfield reclaims the tarnished phrase "adult entertainment." This is smart, sophisticated fun for grown-ups who appreciate the finer things, who get it.

Whitfield's Wonderful, Whimsical Ride

by Andrew Gilbert - Contra Costa Times December 11, 2003

Wesla Whitfield's sensational new show at the Plush Room, "Why Shouldn't I?" isn't organized around any particular theme or composer. Rather, the Bay Area jazz/cabaret star has simply woven together a dozen and a half or so of her favorite tunes. Or maybe not so simply, since her choices reveal the contrasting impulses that make her performances so satisfying. A student of the American Songbook, Whitfield is known for her deft sense of swing and incisive ballad readings, which often reveal overlooked nuances in a lyric. Few singers are better at capturing the giddy high of falling in love and the overpowering anguish of heartbreak, topics explored thoroughly in the standard repertoire. But no one besides Whitfield pairs a wildly romantic streak with a gift for gallivanting through the American Songbook's slim silly chapters, the gloriously daft works where lyricists indulge in their most imaginative word play. At Tuesday's performance, the opening night of a five-week run, she traced an emotional bell curve, starting with songs of quietly besotted love, building to an uproarious climax and then coming back down with some serious meditations on mortality and, of course, love. She opened the show with a hushed version of the Johnny Burke/Jimmy Van Heusen gem "But Beautiful," and a sensuous rendition of Carolyn Leigh and Cy Coleman's "You Fascinate Me So," taken at a much slower pace than it is usually sung. She was accompanied marvelously by bassist John Wiitala and pianist Mike Greensill, whose crystalline arrangements struck an optimal balance between open space and lithe harmonic support. Her warm, fine-grained voice has rarely sounded better, particularly on her occasional a cappella introductions. Whitfield eased into a lighter mood with an ophthalmic medley of "I Only Have Eyes For You" and "Jeepers Creepers," followed by a section of tunes by lyricist Yip Harburg, including "What Is There to Do" and "Then I'll Be Tired of You," which boasts a beautiful, deceptively simple Arthur Schwartz melody. But it was the seldom-heard Harburg/Harold Arlen tour de force "Lydia," a descriptive

piece about a well-tattooed lady, that unleashed Whitfield's antic sense of humor. She reached the zenith of silliness with her deft rendition of Harry Warren and Al Dubin's "Girlfriend of the Whirling Dervish," an ode to a cuckolded fellow that manages to rhyme "rupee" with "making whoopee." Whitfield has rarely given her playful side such free rein, and the results were delicious. While Dave Frishberg's "Sports Page" seemed like more frivolity at first, it quickly changed directions with its sad-but-true view of baseball as a refuge from the moral ambiguity of politics (at least in the pre-steroids era). Whitfield's exhilarating rendition of Stephen Sondheim's "Everybody Says Don't" was a revelation, as he's a writer she rarely tackles. Fleet and smart, her reading begged for further Sondheim excursions. With Wiitala's tolling bass seeming to mark the passage of years, her delicate version of Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson's classic "September Songs," the title track of her latest HighNote album, was particularly evocative. After the drama and laughs, she sent the audience out into the rain with a bit of pallet-clearing holiday cheer, swinging sweetly through "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

This Singer's Singer Captures the Gold

Wesla Whitfield displays talent and taste in the first of five shows at the Performing Arts Center

by Jeff Rubio Orange County Register, February 20, 2003

Fans of the Great American Songbook, that collection of musical standards drawn mainly from the Golden Age of Broadway, should give real thought to heading to Founders Hall at the Orange County Performing Arts Center through Saturday. The reason is Wesla Whitfield, surely one of the best interpreters of that genre on the planet. Whitfield, in town as part of the center's intimate Cabaret Series, is a real singer's singer, a creamy alto (with an occasional hint of rasp to make things interesting) whose praises have been sung by Tony Bennett and a lot of other pedigreed vocalists. The term "cabaret singer" certainly fits as well. She's a regular at many of the top cabaret spots in the country, including the famed Oak Room at New York's Algonquin Hotel and her home base, the Plush Room in San Francisco's York Hotel. But don't expect feathered boas or big theatrical flourishes. As she demonstrated Tuesday in an 80-minute set, she's about serving the music, not the other way around. Given the accolades, Whitfield probably qualifies for diva-dom. But she rejects any pretentiousness. Instead, she embraces a graceful jazz style well-complemented by her pianist husband, Mike Greensill, a tasteful arranger and an accompanist of uncluttered elegance. The set ranged from warmly playful to evocative, with tunes like Irving Berlin's "The Best Thing for You Would Be Me" and Sammy Fain's "I Left My Sugar Standing in the Rain" exemplifying the former, and songs such as "In the Wee Hours of the Morning" providing the blue stuff. In all cases, Whitfield, seemed to let the soul of the song unfold naturally, without undue exertion on her part. Her own instrument is such that she needn't push things. And she doesn't. Just smooth shifting here. While the material is Broadway, there's a definite jazz groove throughout. Whitfield can swing, as she does on the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic "My Favorite Things." As usual, husband Greensill is a significant accomplice,

who, like Whitfield, knows how to spice without compromising a song's original recipe. The singer, and her audience, also had the benefit of talented bassist John Wiitala, who traded some impressive but unshowy solos with Greensill. His bowing of his stand-up bass added moody resonance to Cole Porter's "I Concentrate on You." Indeed, there's enough good playing in support of Whitfield to satisfy one's instrumental craving. As usual, Whitfield, a paraplegic since being the victim of a gun accident years ago, was carried by her husband to her stool next to his Yamaha grand piano. The legs may be immobile, but, as we were reminded during the lovely concert-closing rendition of "Over the Rainbow," the voice has wings.

In Singer's Hands, Old Songs Are Anything But Standard

by Richard Dyer

Boston Globe, August 24, 2002

Wesla Whitfield has a new, glam Marilyn Monroe look. "I got tired of dying my hair gray," the singer explained to her devoted and delighted audience at Scullers Wednesday night. Whitfield hasn't been to the area for a couple of years, and it was good to have her back. Today there is no one better at what she does, which is to sing songs with a piano and bass in a small, dark room to people who love to listen to them. In two generous sets, she offered a handful of standards -- "The Nearness of You," "Heat Wave," "Cheek to Cheek" -- some of them drawn from her newest CD (it's her 14th), an Irving Berlin songbook, "The Best Thing for You Would Be Me" (High Note Records). There was also a bouquet of tunes you don't hear as often -- Cole Porter's politically incorrect "Come to the Supermarket in Old Peking," "An Occasional Man," Dave Frishberg's clever "Let's Eat Home," and a pair of songs by film composer Bronislaw Kaper, including "A Message From the Man in the Moon." "This song was in a Marx Brothers film, 'A Day at the Races,' but no one sang it -- it was just in the background, on the soundtrack. How's that for obscure?" Whitfield asked. The singer has legitimate classical training -- she was once a member of the San Francisco Opera chorus -- but you don't hear any inflation in her tonal quality; where you hear it is in her long breath, which supports her elegant and expressive phrasing. She can still produce a sweet, clear sound when she wants to, and she wanted to in Berlin's irresistible "Moonshine Lullaby"; she can add and subtract vibrato; and she can even rasp -- whatever the song and her feeling about it requires. The technique also shows in a song such as "Green Dolphin Street," which is so hard for a singer to keep in tune that we usually hear it as an instrumental. Whitfield is good at chatting up the audience, which she treats as a group of personal friends. "Perry Como made this song famous, but don't let that worry you," she said before singing "Dreamer's Holiday." She can also beam about herself and her strategies ("Now we will have the rousing closer, followed by an encore"), and she informed us that her arranger-pianist, Mike Greensill, had asked her at what age it becomes "inappropriate" to sing "Blame It on My Youth" (Greensill is also her husband). She lost a lyric in "Heat Wave" then said, "But it looks so easy." Ultimately, there is nothing easy about what Whitfield does; she just makes it sound that way. Her singing is musically sophisticated and emotionally direct, and when she sings "the moon is high, the lamp is low," even the neon gas-station

sign visible through the Scullers windows looks glowingly romantic. Then she will turn sassy, worldly, or naughty, investing everything with her own experience of life. She's also a sensational chamber musician and listener. Greensill is a deft arranger and admirable pianist who knows how and when to support a singer, how and when to stay out of the way. And bassist Sean Smith has a genius for his instrument; he can inflect a plucked melody in the high register so that it sounds as if he's bowing, or even as if he's singing. "Nice 'n' Easy" was virtually a duet with Whitfield, and it was magic. Whitfield, her fans know, was shot in the back by kids playing with a gun 25 years ago, and she usually sings on a high stool, to which Greensill carries her when she comes on. Last night was the first time I've seen her sing in her wheelchair. It gave her more mobility and more opportunity to address each member of the audience directly -- which is what Wesla Whitfield is all about

by Judith Newmark
St Louis Post-Dispatch, July 24, 2001

"Despite intense heat and thunderstorms, more than 8,000 people came to The Muny on Monday night for the opening of "An Evening of Gershwin." Because of weather, the show started 45 minutes late. But the rain cooled things down enough for those who rode out the storm to enjoy an evening of sophisticated entertainment to the max. The stylish chanteuse Wesla Whitfield, who has a nervy little edge to her voice, turns "I've Got a Crush on You" into a seductive, utterly elegant invitation. The orchestra, under the direction of Michael Horsley, is clear and confident throughout. However, the second-act medley with Mike Greensill's refined piano is a welcome touch, evoking an evening in a New York penthouse with some terrifically talented friends. Incidentally, Whitfield and Greensill are married to each other. Also incidentally, Whitfield uses a wheelchair. Since she handles it matter-of-factly, the audience does, too. It's not an issue, just a circumstance. There may be some kind of lesson in that, but Whitfield is too impressive a singer to waste time pointing it out."

by Don Heckman
The Los Angeles Times

"It's a rare moment when all the elements of a performance--the words, the music and the interpretation--come together in perfect balance. But that's exactly what happened Tuesday night when singer Wesla Whitfield opened a 10-night run at the Cinegrill in the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. Whitfield has long been a favorite with cabaret audiences, and the imaginative, often swinging musical settings provided by her pianist/musical director and husband, Mike Greensill, have placed her in an attractive jazz context as well...What they are doing with Rodgers and Hart is sheer magic, a definitive illustration of how to realize the art music qualities in popular song. In three numbers in particular--"You Are Too Beautiful," "Ten Cents a Dance" and "The Lady Is a Tramp"--Whitfield transformed the songs into dramatic cameos. Beautifully sustaining their musical

qualities, often via pure, airy high notes and unexpected little melodic twists, she used her fluent singing skills as a medium for storytelling, clearly delineating the inner character tales implicit in each work. She found the sardonic Hart wit in some tunes--"I Like to Recognize the Tune," for example--and his marvelous descriptive qualities (the colorful, mood-evoking lyrics of "Manhattan") in others. These extraordinary mini-dramas were accomplished within musical frameworks filled with sly musicality and an unerring sense of swing. Greensill, immensely aided by the virtuosic bass playing of Michael Moore, accompanied in a fashion that both supported and challenged Whitfield's musicality, producing results as multilayered and intricate as the voice-piano interaction in a Schubert song. Working in combination as a trio--voice, piano and bass--Whitfield, Greensill and Moore were brilliant, an incomparable blending of musical intelligence and dramatic sophistication."

by Terry Teachout
N.Y. Daily News

"Light up the skyrockets and put out more flags: Wesla Whitfield's back in town. The best cabaret singer in the world has set up shop at the Kaufman Theater with a one-woman show called "Life Upon the Wicked Stage." There's not much to it — she sings 20 songs and chats about the ups and downs of her career — but the talk is droll, the songs are wonderful and the singing is so good that you'll hug yourself with delight."