

Whitfield and Greensill — valley treasures still cross musical borders

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Having queued up at Bay Area theaters and boites for more than four decades qualifies this listener and fan to make a few observations about the craft of singer Wesla Whitfield.

While I initially encountered Whitfield in a stage production about quintessential torch singer Helen Morgan, it was the club and cabaret persona I got to know best.

Working with one of the best pianists and arrangers in the business, Mike Greensill (who also happens to be her lifemate), Whitfield mines the great American songbook for musical treasures that enrich and entertain.

She dislikes being pigeonholed by people like me who write about great talents like her.

Whitfield is a marvelous songbird, but descriptions with her don't come easily. She's quick to point out that she's not a jazz singer; on top of that, she eschews the term "cabaret."

Anyone who listens to Whitfield in concert — on a CD or live, like the performance offered at Napa Valley Opera House last Saturday night — quickly learns that she embraces a wealth of styles and formats, and that she's one-of-a-kind. Jazz is certainly part of her charm, and she sure can hold her own with all who lay claim to cabaret stylings. Her voice is warm, comforting, at times angelic. First and foremost, though, she respects the lyricist. Her performance style often places added emphasis on lyrics — what the song is all about. Her phrasing is impeccable, her ability to get the message across second to none. In an era that followed the Great Depression, lyricists entrusted their efforts to cabaret paragon Mabel Mercer. Now that Mercer is singing in the heavenly choir, that baton has been passed to Whitfield.

OK — there I've said it. Wesla Whitfield is a present-day Mabel Mercer for those of us surviving yet another economic and political downturn.

During the crisis that brought the Roaring '20s to a crashing halt, the songwriting team of Buddy DeSylva, Ray Henderson and Lew Brown put pen to paper and came up with the enduring classic, "The Best Things in Life Are Free." Whitfield and Greensill selected that standard as the title track for their latest CD, one recorded live this past spring in San Francisco's Rrazz Room.

Whitfield's fall concert focused on the new CD, with 10 of the 13 tracks incorporated in the rewarding two-hour Opera House show.

The evening began with an jolly instrumental, "Sweet and Lovely," arranged by Greensill, featuring the other musicians on the recording — unstinting bassist John Wiitala and delightful drummer Vince Lateano — and a welcome guest saxophonist, Gary Foster.

A pianist who satisfies the intellect as well as the urge to tap one's toes, Greensill has been a regular at a wealth of Bay Area restaurants and lounges over the past few decades — Washington Square Bar & Grill, Stars, Moose's, to name a few. Along with his gracious spouse, they've endeared themselves with audiences from coast to coast. Whether it's the Algonquin in New York or the Rrazz Room, Whitfield and Greensill pack 'em in.

The Opera House show mixed both upbeat (Cy Coleman and Murray Grand's "Kick Off Your Shoes" along with Ted Koehler and Harold Arlen's "Happy As the Day Is Long") and ballads (a delightful rendition of a '30s Guy Lombardo number, "A Sailboat in the Moonlight," and "Easy Living," a heartfelt song associated with Billie Holiday).

Whitfield grabbed us with the verse and then caught us up in the haunting refrain of Rodgers and Hart's "I Didn't Know What Time It Was," a song Ol' Blue Eyes delivered in the film version of "Pal Joey." Another song associated with Sinatra, also from the '30s, "I Can't Believe That You're in Love with Me," proved to be a solid swinger for Whitfield and company.

But the evening's pièce de résistance, the sole encore, "You Must Believe in Spring," left us teary-eyed and treasuring the whole experience. It's a song by Michel Legrand and Jacques Demy from Demy's Oscar-nominated film musical, "The Girls of Rochefort. The lyrics by Alan and Marilyn Bergman tug at the heartstrings.

"So in a world of snow, Of things that come and go, Where what you think you know, You can't be certain of, You must believe in Spring and love."

Considering the standing ovation, I'm sure Saturday night's audience believes.

Whitfield, Greensill even better than the movies

*David Wiegand,
San Francisco Chronicle Staff Writer*

Saturday, May 15, 2010

Music has had a tough time of it in Hollywood over the years. It took until 1934 to give Oscar consideration to songwriters, after which movie songs were pretty hot stuff for a while. Now, more often than not, movie soundtracks are mere compilations of existing pop songs.

In between, lots of great songs were written for the movies, and Wesla Whitfield, the Bay Area's greatest treasure next to, oh, the Golden Gate Bridge, celebrates them in a superb set at the Nikko Hotel's Razz Room through the end of the month.

That you shouldn't miss it goes without saying. Whitfield has this maddening, uncanny ability to take the most familiar ditty and make it feel completely new and untarnished through her singular musicality. If you're able to detach yourself from the emotional cloud she creates in her delivery of songs such as Irving Berlin's "Blue Skies" or David Raksin and Johnny Mercer's "Laura," pay attention to what, for other singers, would be the boringly technical nuts and bolts of the delivery. The tone is bell-like and clear - the vibrato held to a minimum and used only toward the end of a perfectly held note.

Her phrasing is, of course, a wonder of gentle surprises: You hear it in the way she holds the word "so" in the "Smile" lyric "ever so near" - two letters, one syllable, adding up to something so sizzling, it's nearly X-rated. Then there's the way she takes "Codfish Ball," which Shirley Temple sang in "Captain January," and gives it a grown-up twist, slowing the bounce with a knowing wink to the audience that we ain't just talking about frolicking seafood here, folks.

There's a reason that Whitfield and her pianist husband, Mike Greensill, chose songs from the late '20s to 1970, and that is because often, movie songs from that half-century were meant to be integral to the films themselves. At the same time, Greensill and Whitfield have pulled them out of context to remind us that they were written by real masters of the American songbook.

The noir film "Laura," for example, was murky, mysterious, otherworldly, and so was the © 2011 Hearst Communications Inc. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Contact](#)
Raksin-Mercer song that wafted throughout the film like fading blue smoke from a crushed cigarette.

Whitfield's delivery both celebrates the hypnotic brilliance of the film while giving the number a faintly lively bounce, transforming it from a song of melancholy and mourning to one of fondly remembering a past love.

Among the other highlights in the set are the plaintive Harry Warren/Mack Gordon song "I Know Why (and So Do You)," the giddy and glorious "The Girlfriend of the Whirling Dervish," by Warren and Mercer, and the heartbreaking "When I Look Into Your Eyes," by Leslie Bricusse.

Greensill's arrangements are as much on display as Whitfield's thrilling vocals. And he's more than ably supported by bassist John Wiitala and drummer Vince Lateano, charter members of the Bay Area's musical aristocracy.

You won't have a better time at the movies than the hour and a half you spend in the dark with Mike and Wesla.

You May Say I'm a Dreamer but I Can Imagine, Can't I ?

by Stephen Holden
New York Times

January 14, 2005

The San Francisco pop-jazz singer Wesla Whitfield dryly observes at the start of her latest cabaret show, "In My Life," that the New Year has "very little to recommend it." So how does she advise those of us who share her dread to face the future? A retreat into fantasy is called for, she declares, her tongue planted firmly in her cheek. "Reality is highly overrated."

What follows is a show at Le Jazz au Bar in which Ms. Whitfield combines ruthless insight, intense emotion and highly evolved jazz phrasing into a musical evening that goes beyond mere entertainment to flirt with profundity. Ms. Whitfield has always shown signs that she glimpsed more than she let on about the popular standards she chose. But until recently, they have been flickers of light at the fringes of performances that often seemed complacent.

But since last I saw her, Ms. Whitfield has undergone a personal revolution. Her voice, at once tart and poignant, has acquired broader, subtler shadings, and she now reads a song like a personal short story in an artfully managed stream of rushes and hesitations, with half-spoken passages giving way to dreamy lyrical afterthoughts.

Her style, for all its originality, is anything but eccentric. Her interpretations are informed by a keen critical intelligence that views songs as tough-minded dialogues between cynicism and romantic faith. At the same time, Ms. Whitfield's husband and longtime musical partner, Mike Greensill, cushions her sharper edges with his gently contemplative pianism. (John Wiitala plays bass.)

One conceptual coup is the insertion of a pertinent excerpt from John Lennon's "Imagine" into Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley's "Pure Imagination." Another is a sequence of three songs, "We're in the Money," "Money" (from the movie "Cabaret") and "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?," offered as a critique of our gilded age.

"Some Other Time," from "On the Town," is carried into a metaphysical dimension that suggests a reunion in the afterlife. And "Bali Ha'i," floating on a light Latin pulse, becomes a song of witchy seduction.

In the realm of cabaret, you can't get much deeper and (in keeping with the show's theme) more imaginative.

Backstage

by David Finkle

January 06, 2009

There's any number of people who'll tell you that at the moment there's no better purveyor of standards in America than Wesla Whitfield. I'm one of them. When it comes to Whitfield, I'm not a reviewer; I'm a dyed-in-the-wool fan. My conviction about her superiority was anything but shaken after she'd finished a few days ago the first show of a four-performance weekend at the Oak Room at the Algonquin Hotel — with hubby Mike Greensill at the piano, of course.

It's not just the quality of the voice — the shimmering sound she has that gives every song she sings the vital quickness of life. It's not just that she considers every word of a lyric and locates in each phrase the emotion, the humor, the whatever it is that the wordsmiths put there. It's a combination of the voice and the consideration and, of equal importance, her sunny disposition, which this outing she established immediately in her opener, "My Shining Hour" -Harold Arlen). When she sang about what was indeed to be a shining hour, she was the very embodiment of Mercer's "calm and happy and bright."

Whitfield progressed to the Gershwin brothers' "Fascinatin' Rhythm," during which she and Greensill explored several fascinatin' rhythms. Her chat was always happy and bright, although she didn't always limit it to calm. She certainly didn't when she included "Ding Dong! The Witch Is Dead" (E.Y. Harburg-Arlen) and said that these days patrons often think she's being political by chanting it. She is, she confides.

By the time Whitfield reached the jubilant Wizard of Oz classic, she'd already pulled a few neat tricks from her sleeve. Joking about the recession, she glided into a medley of "We're in the Money" (Al Dubin-Harry Warren), "Money Makes the World Go Around" (Fred Ebb-John Kander), and "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" (Harburg-Jay Gorney). As clever a trick and a bit subtler were her back-to-back versions of "Bali Ha'i" and "Surrey With the Fringe on Top." Needless to say, they're both by Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rodgers and couldn't be a better pairing to show what the R&H range could be.

Whitfield cherishes words to such an extent that she introduced the Lorenz Hart-Richard Rodgers "Isn't It Romantic?" by saying it includes a thought she finds exceedingly poetic. It turns out not to be the phrase "sweet symbols in the moonlight," which she apparently considers a little pretentious, but the sentence "Isn't it romantic merely to be young on such a night as this?" After making a spellbinder of the tune, she said she's decided what Hart meant by the thought was that romance confers youth on couples no matter their age.

Wheelchair-bound, Whitfield has taken to steering herself into the room and up to the riser, where Greensill swiftly and deftly pulls her up the few inches. She leaves by reversing the action and somehow manages to convey throughout that she's not confined by the chair; she occupies it as an 18th-century lady might occupy a sedan or a 20th-century driver would operate a revved Indianapolis 500 race car. There's no need to say more power to her, because she makes it clear she's already as powerful as she needs or wants to be. She couldn't be righter.

This Voice Needs No Adornment

*by David Wiegand,
San Francisco Chronicle*

Saturday, May 30, 2009

Among the evils "American Idol" has unleashed on the world is the notion that to sing a song, one must perform vocal gymnastics in such a mannered frenzy that the actual song becomes all but unrecognizable, not to mention eviscerated of all meaning, soul and heart.

Wesla Whitfield doesn't do that. She doesn't have to. She doesn't need to resort to vocal tricks because she has a real voice. What's more, as she demonstrates repeatedly in her sublime 15-song program at the Nikko Hotel's Rrazz Room through June 7, she can virtually worship the heart and soul of any song and make us want to be part of the congregation.

What a wonder is Wesla, and never so much as when she's working with that big talented lug she married, the eloquent pianist/arranger Mike Greensill. Three years ago, the city actually allowed these icons to escape to Wine Country, but as Wesla made clear on Thursday night even without singing that song, she left her heart in San Francisco and is grateful for the chance to catch up with it again for a while. So are we.

Her set, which she dubbed "As Time Goes By," ran the gamut from that song itself, to other standards such as "You Make Me Feel So Young," "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" and "You've Got Possibilities," to the slyly suggestive "A Guy What Takes His Time" ("I have no idea what that song means," she deadpanned), to Lennon/McCartney's "In My Life" and the comic "A Little Tin Box" from the old musical "Fiorello."

Every song was a standout, of course, but if you can force yourself to stand outside the Whitfield magic for a bit, consider how she works, how she delivers a song. First, there is the phrasing, perhaps, as Mabel Mercer taught us, the secret to great singing. Whitfield's is precise - not that it's the same from song to song, but, in fact, correct and careful for each song.

And then there is the voice itself. It is, in the best ways, an unadorned instrument. There may be a slight vibrato here and there, but only for the most subtle emphasis at a key moment in a musical phrase. The rest of the time, it's clear, bell-like, unwavering.

Finally, there is her innate understanding that good singing is also good storytelling. Each song is a little novel for Whitfield, something rich with meaning and emotion, and her job - which she fulfills effortlessly time and time again in her 90-minute set - is to bring us in to the experience of the song.

Most singers would probably give in to the temptation to mess around with a standard, thinking, somehow, that you have to do that to make it seem "new." But when Whitfield sings "As Time Goes By," for example, she doesn't try to interpolate the notes from the outside, but rather by honoring the song as it was written, finds new meaning within its structure. The understated way she delivers the line "that no one can deny," for example, is absolutely thrilling because somehow, though we've heard that lyric over and over again, all of a sudden, it's this hushed surprise.

Greensill is every bit her partner on stage, of course. His arrangements mirror his wife's artistic respect for the material while at the same time making the familiar seem somehow new again. He and Whitfield are ably supported by drummer Vince Lateano and the always terrific John Wiitala on standup bass.

Variety

by Robert L. Daniels

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 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.

The Los Angeles Times

by Don Heckman

"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."

N.Y. Daily News

by Terry Teachout

"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."