



presents

Paula West, vocalist with the George Mesterhazy Quartet

George Mesterhazy, piano/arranger Barak Mori, bass
Ed Cherry, guitar Jerome Jennings, drums

Saturday, October 10, 2009, 8pm

Herbst Theatre

PROGRAM

Tonight's program will be announced from the stage.

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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Paula West appears with San Francisco Performances for the third time. Previous concerts were in October 2008, also with the George Mesterhazy Quartet, and at the 26th Season Gala in 2005.

Paula West



Without question Paula West, who returns tonight in her third San Francisco Performances appearance, is one of the premier jazz-cabaret singers of the past decade. What became clear when she opened last fall's Jazz Series is that she creates a concert that comments on life today by juxtaposing standards with newer songs, and emphasizing certain lyrics.

When she took the 2008 San Francisco Performances program to New York's storied Algonquin Hotel for an extended run, *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden proclaimed: "Could it be that songs written more than 40 years ago are as good or better at addressing these scary times than what is written today? Ms. West's compelling show invites you to believe that the past is present, and history runs in cycles. There she stands, at the front of the march."

West is poised to repeat that feat tonight by debuting a new show here before again taking it to the Algonquin. The 2008 concert was a pre-election musical commentary, while this new program continues to investigate our times with interpretations of songs that are as surprising as they are beautiful.

The singer always includes a song or two by Bob Dylan. Last year she sang the fitting

The Times They Are A-Changin'. This year she plans to include *Maggie's Farm*, the song that Dylan performed electric at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, outraging and exciting the audience. The other selection is *All I Really Want to Do*, which on the surface seems to be about relationships — that is until West gets hold of it.

"I interpret *All I Really Want to Do*, for example, with all the craziness going on now, like people disrupting the Town Hall meetings on health care, it seems insane to me how some of these people behave," comments West. "It seems that some people want failure, and don't even want to give change a chance. I was angry during the previous administration, but now these people are shouting down anything they don't agree with. So, this song is what I have to say, what I want."

Then there is the lesser-known *Where Flamingos Fly*, which West has wanted to perform for a few years. "There are so many songs, and people are always suggesting things for me to sing. But the way I find songs, I'm usually listening to music for pleasure and a song will just jump out, like this one on a Peggy Lee album."

Although West and her pianist-arranger George Mesterhazy carefully assemble the show, it's always "announced from the stage," because at any moment some other song may seem more appropriate. Other tunes planned for tonight include the lilt-ing Simon and Garfunkel hit, *Feelin' Groovy* (*59th Street Bridge Song*), and the old English song, *Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes*. West usually includes some standards from the Great American Songbook, Rodgers and Hart, Cole Porter, the Gershwins, but loves to mix them with her expanded repertoire of more modern composers, such as Hank Williams, Johnny Cash and Leonard Cohen. Many shows feature her two most requested songs: *The Snake* (West shared the Herbst Theatre stage in 2003 with its composer, Oscar Brown, Jr.) and Antonio Carlos Jobim's *Waters of March*.

"What all of these songs that I love have in common," West explains, "is that they have a meaning to me. Not necessarily something that I'm feeling right now, but at some point I do, and that's what comes through when I sing. I only do songs that I really like, so I never get tired of singing them."

Her pianist and arranger of four years, George Mesterhazy, has accompanied some of the vocal greats of his time, including Shirley Horn, Bernadette Peters and Mark Murphy. He says of West's approach to cabaret: "Paula



George Mesterhazy

does that, but she comes at it with a jazz attitude, and she's one of the best approachers to a lyric I've heard. She's in the top five with Carmen McRae, Shirley Horn, Blossom Dearie and Peggy Lee. That's why Paula can turn a Dylan song into cabaret and people come up afterward and say, 'I finally got the lyrics.'"

Mesterhazy's quartet knows how to support every nuance in West's singing. They are: guitarist Ed Cherry (a veteran of 14 years with Dizzy Gillespie), bassist Barak Mori (who also works with singer Madeleine Peyroux and pianist Eric Reed), and drummer Jerome Jennings. A 2007 *New York Times* review by Holden notes, "With each engagement Ms. West...displays more courage, maturity, interpretive insight and vocal confidence. She and the quartet...are a match made in pop-jazz heaven."

West's third and most recent CD was issued eight years ago. And while lack of a new recording is frustrating for her growing following, her performing schedule is increasingly busy. She and the band appeared at New York's prestigious club The Jazz Standard in May, then dropped into Yoshi's San Francisco in July. That was after returning to the Spoleto Festival the previous summer, and in January making her first concert appearance in Israel and second in Turkey. "I was in Tel Aviv airport as Barack Obama was being sworn in, watching it on TV, and I was in tears," says West.

Growing up in San Diego, West didn't plan to be a singer. She didn't sing in church as a child, or listen to jazz at home, where her Marine Corps father usually played classical recordings. She played clarinet in school. Only after she completed college and moved to San Francisco in 1988 did singing come into focus. "I wasn't thinking of being any kind of singer. I was attracted to standards

before I became a singer. I was drawn to the lyrics, the stories they told. Starting out, I just wanted to create an outlet for myself, didn't know what to do, and found that my passion was in singing. Now I don't think I could go on without singing."

She took singing classes, went to jam sessions, and studied with top San Francisco vocal coach Faith Winthrop. West worked full-time as a waitress, and also sang most nights of the week, sometimes in tiny bars, other times doing a few numbers at the invitation of musicians such as pianist Larry Vuckovich. "I wasn't making a lot of money, but I got a lot of experience, learning the songs...I find young players and singers aren't exposed to the repertoire now, all those great songs. Not only did I listen to the usual suspects, but also to less well known greats such as Ethel Waters and Pearl Bailey. I'd cruise the music stores and pick up things that looked interesting, find the song folios that had all the choruses of a song that Rodgers and Hart or Cole Porter originally wrote, not just the one that everyone sings."

West began searching for a way to present her music in a longer run, and tried the York Hotel's now-shuttered Plush Room, where people quickly discovered her, including San Francisco Performances founder and President Ruth Felt, who recruited her for the SFP Salon Series. The late San Francisco Examiner critic Phil Elwood wrote, "It is no accident that West got gigs when others didn't—her ingratiating personality, her utterly natural approach to singing, her ever-increasing repertoire, her unbelievable diligence in preparation and performance ... have led to a remarkably fast ascendancy on the Bay Area's performing arts ladder of success."

Established in San Francisco, West conquered New York in 1996 with her first of what has become many annual extended runs at the famed Algonquin Hotel's Oak Room. After the demise of the Plush Room, she became the first artist to perform at the new Rrazz Room in Hotel Nikko, which she opened in February 2008 with a month-long run, and will return to next year. "The Great American Songbook has never sounded as captivating as it does when Paula West sings," wrote San Francisco critic Steven Winn of that debut. "It's doubtful that anyone is singing better than Paula West these days...this extraordinary jazz singer wears each song like perfectly fitted silk."

— Program notes by Larry Kelp, © 2009