

INTERVIEW

OUT OF THE WOODS

After a 15-year hiatus from recording, Bernadette Peters has two new albums for hungry fans to savor

by Jeffrey L. Newman

Bernadette Peters is one of the true divas of contemporary musical theater. With a captivating voice that is unique and unmistakable, and her trademark blonde, frizzy curls, the songstress knows the art of putting it together to bring an emotional power to her performances.

From her masterful Tony Award-winning one-woman turn in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Song and Dance* to her esoteric and inspired role in Stephen

Music

Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George* to her dazzling performance in Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, Peters has earned a place in musical theater history that is indisputable and somewhat untouchable. Along the way she has also earned a large and loyal following, especially in the gay community.

"I think gay people are lovers of performers who are expressive and who throw themselves into things very deeply, which I do," says the 48-year-old singer. "But I guess I do have a large gay following. I just never thought about it that way.... I just think that gay people in general are big supporters of the theater, and when they like you, they let you know it and they appreciate you."

The newly married Peters is riding high these days. Her first live album, *Sondheim, Etc.—Live from Carnegie Hall*, on Angel Records, is in stores now. Recorded last December during her one-night-only show at Carnegie Hall as an AIDS benefit for the New York Gay Men's Health Crisis, the set is an exuberant and exhilarating

collection of familiar and not-so-familiar musical theater gems and pop standards and showcases the singer at her finest. A portion of the proceeds from the recording go to GMHC. She is also enjoying renewed recording success via her stellar Angel debut, *I'll Be Your Baby Tonight*, which was released last October.

Peters is very excited about the live recording. She has long been involved in helping to raise money for the fight against AIDS, and the standing-room-only concert certainly did that. Moreover, at least once a year she headlines a major AIDS benefit and regularly performs at other benefits around the country.

"I've lost two very close friends, Peter [Allen] and one of the dancers who worked with me," she says. "When Peter went, it really affected me a lot. When you work that closely with someone and you perform with them a lot, you get to know their soul. He was a good person. But I've been fortunate in that I haven't lost a lot of close friends. Peter was the closest."

Peters believes that the red ribbons that are often worn as a symbol of AIDS awareness are still effective, as it reminds people of the need to continue the fight against AIDS.

"It's important. I don't see how it hurts," she says. "Some of the AIDS groups have asked people not to wear them because they feel it desensitizes people to the issue. I don't know if I agree with that. But I suppose if everyone is not wearing them and one person feels strongly enough to wear one, it makes it more pointed, more poignant."

Peters made her television debut at age 3 1/2. At age 9, she made her first stage appearance. Four years later she landed the role of Dainty June in the road show of *Gypsy*, and soon after made

her Broadway debut. In 1968, at age 20, she landed a lead role in *George M!*, which was immediately followed by the lead in *Dames at Sea*, the show that made her a star and earned her a Drama Desk Award for best actress in a musical.

Other Broadway musicals that followed include Jerry Herman's romp *Mack and Mabel* with Robert Preston; the brilliant *Sunday in the Park with George* with Mandy Patinkin; the emotionally powerful *Song and Dance*—for which she won a Tony Award; Stephen Sondheim's inventive take on Grimm's fairy tales, *Into the Woods*; and 1994's disappointing *The Goodbye Girl*.

She's also starred in more than a half a dozen feature films, including *Annie*, *Slaves of New York*, *Pennies from Heaven* and *The Jerk*, the last two with Steve Martin.

But her recording career has been less extensive. In Peters' three-decade career, *I'll Be Your Baby Tonight* was her third non-cast recording release, and the first in more than 15 years.

When the head of Angel Records caught Peters' performance at a benefit in New York two years ago, he suggested she make a new album. *I'll Be Your Baby Tonight* was the breathtaking result.

It was a welcome return from a singer who is captivating in her ability to take a song and make it her own. Passionate and hypnotic, Peters wraps herself within the texture and context of each song, drawing upon her own experiences to bring forth emotionally charged interpretations that few performers can achieve. Praised by critics, the album is enjoying brisk sales.

Surprisingly, Peters doesn't draw from the singers she heard while growing up. Moreover, she was heavily influenced by male performers—Frank Sinatra, Fred Astaire ("I just adore him"), Andy Williams and Gogi Grant—much more so than women such as Ella Fitzgerald and Judy Garland, whom she admired.

"I love Judy and Ella, but I never wanted to emulate anyone. I felt it was safer if I just never listened to them too much. If I did, I had to listen and forget. I didn't want any other girl singer in my ear. I didn't want people to be able to say, 'You sing like so and so.' I wanted to be original."

The opus is not what most of her fans will expect, however: It's not saturated in Broadway ditties. And it's not subtitled "The Stephen Sondheim Tribute Album." (Although if she has her way, her next album may well be.) Rather it is a varied collection of songs from both the pop and the theater arenas. From the prolific musing of Sondheim ("No One Is Alone") and the carefree simplicity of Rodgers and Hammerstein ("What's the Use of Wond'rin' ") to the '70s rock of Billy Joel ("He's Got a Way") and the '90s poetic genius of Lyle Lovett ("I Make Him Feel Good"), the album moves easily through a gamut of musical styles, never settling in one place too long but never veering off too far, either.

"It's very eclectic, which is what I love about

it. It has surprised a lot of people because it includes music from all walks of life," she says. "People forget that I had a pop hit on the charts years ago ('Gee Whiz'), but that was before I came to Broadway and did all the Sondheim shows and all. People forget that I sing other types of music," she says. "What I love though is being able to jump back and forth between the different styles."

Peters relishes the opportunity to sing a song by Lyle Lovett, who is one of her favorite contemporary singer-songwriters.

"I think Lyle is very witty.... His guise is great. He always has something going on," she says. "He is very soulful when he sings. It's the kind of soul you can hear; it's just incredible. One day I'd love to do an album of all Lyle Lovett songs."

One of the other joys of the album is her rendition of "No One Is Alone," an exquisite ballad of hope from *Into the Woods*. Peters, who will sing it as part of her Make-A-Wish performance, says the song is one of her favorites, as it signifies hope and a belief that no one is alone—something she hopes the gay community realizes.

"I think it's so important that people know that they aren't alone in this world and that people be able to lead openly gay lives, with marriage and all their rights. It's important that gay people feel good about themselves. They shouldn't feel like they have something to hide," she says.

"It's so strange to be talking about gay people as 'they.' It's very strange to separate one person from another.... But I guess it's important in a way to be acknowledged separately if you are a group who needs rights, and certainly that is the case with the gay community.... I mean, the fact that gay marriages aren't recognized is really a shame," she says. "Wouldn't it be great though if everyone in the world wasn't so judgmental?"

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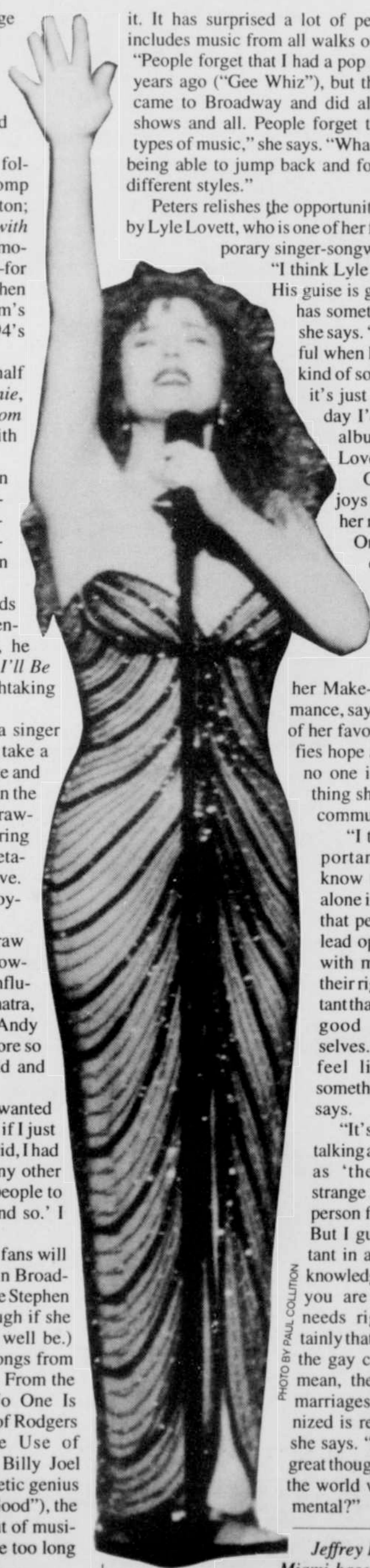


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