

The Little Label That Could

Harbinger Records

By Rebecca Paller



Founders of Harbinger Records
Bill Rudman and
Ken Bloom

For 37 years many lovers of musical theater, cabaret, and the Great American Songbook have considered Harbinger Records to be a musical oasis for all three genres. The label, a division of the nonprofit Musical Theater Project, has released 70 recordings ranging from studio sessions by legends like Maxine Sullivan and Peggy Lee to live performances and recordings by such top-ranked cabaret stars as Eric Comstock, Barbara Fasano, and Sara Zahn, as well as rare archival recordings by Richard Rodgers, Hugh Martin, John Kander, Sheldon Harnick, and other songwriters (including the “backers auditions” of *All American, Barnum*, and *I Love My Wife*).

In this day and age, when countless labels and stores are long gone, it’s amazing that a specialized label—with a name that conjures images of a songbird (Harbinger’s logo) and of good things to come—is releasing six recordings a year, including the recent first edition in a quarter-century of the 1969 original cast recording of Broadway’s *Celebration* by Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt. *Celebration* arrives on the heels of two other Jones and Schmidt recordings: *Hidden Treasures, 1951–2001* and the 1975 original cast recording of *Phile-*

mon. This focus on the more obscure work of the creators of *The Fantasticks* exemplifies the role of Harbinger as both connoisseur and curator—gathering, organizing, putting into context, and making available to the public significant work that deserves to be heard.

Harbinger reflects the discernment and gumption of its founders, Ken Bloom and Bill Rudman, who met in 1977 at a conference at the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center in Connecticut and knew immediately that their passion for musical theater was a strong bond. Their tastes in classic American popular songs and great singers were “absolutely compatible,” the two partners said in a recent interview. “One day we were talking about Ben Bagley’s Painted Smiles record label and we said, ‘We should put out something! How hard could it be?’ Bloom recollected. Not hard at all.

Their first release, in 1983, was a recording of Geraldine Fitzgerald’s one-woman show *Streetsongs*, which embodied another Harbinger tenet: “We want artists who can truly act the song—not just make pretty sounds.” Fitzgerald, an Academy Award nominee for her heartbreaking portrayal of Isabella Linton in the 1939 film *Wuthering Heights*, was an extraordinary actress on stage and screen. In 1976 she was packing in audiences at the New York cabaret Reno Sweeney with a colorful array of numbers from America, England, and her native Ireland—from “Phil the Fluther’s Ball” and “Danny Boy” to “Swanee” (George Gershwin/Irving Caesar) and the Beatles’ “She’s Leaving Home.” In 1979 *Streetsongs* scored a hit at the Roundabout Theater. Rudman was a publicist for the show, and in 1981 he took it to Cleveland’s Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival and had it taped in performance as a gift for Fitzgerald. “When the tapes turned out to be terrific, Ken and I worked on them in a Manhattan studio, and emerged with an album that won rave reviews,” said Rudman. “Miss Fitzgerald fills her performance with lusty, warm-blooded vitality, with humor and sorrow and joy and irony ... [in a voice that] has the compelling immediacy to involve a listener at a variety of levels,” wrote John S. Wilson in *The New York Times*.

By then Bloom had relocated to New York from Washington, D.C., where he wrote and directed musical revues including *The Unsung Jerome Kern* and *Sweet and Hot: The Songs of Harold Arlen*.

Many of the numbers in *Sweet and Hot* were first performed in the 1930s at New York’s famed nightclub the Cotton Club. They became the inspiration for Harbinger’s

second album. "We wanted to include previously unrecorded songs along with standards like 'Stormy Weather,'" said Bloom.

Arlen biographer Ed Jablonski helped them unearth the lesser-known songs, and after "flipping through the bins of Tower Records," Bloom and Rudman concluded that the best of all possible jazz singers would be Maxine Sullivan, who had headlined at the Cotton Club in 1940 with Louis Armstrong. They found her number in the New York City phonebook and made a "cold call" to her, followed by a visit to her home in the South Bronx. Sullivan, 72, was excited about the project and brought along her pianist, Keith Ingham—another "musical soul mate." *Great Songs from the Cotton Club* by Arlen & Koehler was released in 1984, followed by albums devoted to Burton Lane (1985) and Jule Styne (1987).

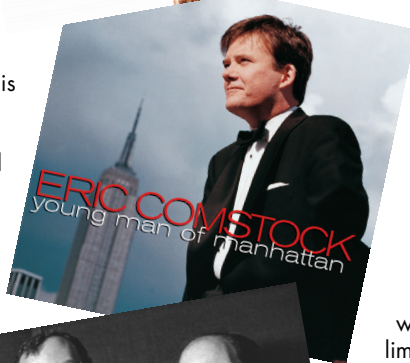
The reviews for the Sullivan recordings were rapturous ("They capture a fine singer at her all-time peak," wrote Will Friedwald), and the singer was suddenly "hot again," with concert bookings aplenty and a 1985 Grammy Award nomination for the Cotton Club album. Perhaps the most moving number on the Sullivan

recordings is "Killing Time," by Jule Styne and Carolyn Leigh. "It's a devastating song, and Maxine gave a performance that went deeper than anything else she had ever done," said Rudman.

For their next venture, the two men pursued the iconic song stylist Peggy Lee. "We called her cold and told her we had an idea. She said, 'I'm going to be playing New York at the Ballroom. Come meet me.'" They went to the Ballroom, but Lee forgot about their meeting. Unfazed, they waited, and when she got into her limousine, they slid into the back seat with her. "Miss Lee, we have this idea for you," they said. "Call me at the hotel tomorrow," she said. When Rudman phoned the Waldorf Astoria the next day, she was eating lunch and "not too keen on talking," so he took the bull by the horns. "Miss Lee, here's the idea. You will record an album comprised entirely of unknown, unrecorded songs by Harold Arlen." Her response was quick. "Oh, I would be interested in that."

The two producers and Keith Ingham went to Lee's home in Los Angeles and auditioned 14 songs for her.

Lee said, "Do you know how difficult it is to find songs of this quality?" and agreed to make the recording. "Everything you heard about how hard she worked and what a perfectionist Peggy Lee was—it's all true," said Rudman.



This page (from top) Barbara Fassano, Eric Comstock, Maxine Sullivan, Bill Rudman, Ken Bloom, Maxine Sullivan, Jule Styne. Opposite page (from top) Geraldine Fitzgerald album cover, Ken Bloom, Sheldon Harnick, Bill Rudman, Backer's Audition album cover, I Love My Life, Sissle & Blake Sing Shuffle Along.

"When she arrived, in her wheelchair, at [Manhattan's] Clinton Recording Studios, 'she knew the stuff cold.'"

Love Held Lightly: Rare Songs by Harold Arlen, was released in 1993—several years after Lee recorded it. The reason for the delay? Rudman and Bloom detected unspoken fears that she was not at her peak. She need not have worried; the reviews were rhapsodic, with special praise for two bittersweet songs: "Come On, Midnight" and "I Had a Love Once," in which "Ms. Lee's age is an asset" and her "darkly moving

readings" were a benchmark for all singers to follow, wrote *Entertainment Weekly's* Chip Deffaa. Will Friedwald, who wrote the liner notes for the album, called it Lee's "best work since her Capitol Record days."

Enlightening liner notes are another Harbinger hallmark. Among those who have written for the booklets included with the CDs and downloads are William Bolcom, Stephen Sondheim, Sheldon Harnick, Tom Jones,

Jesse Green, Marc Horowitz, Michael Feinstein, and Ted Chapin. Harbinger's archival recording of *Sissle & Blake Sing "Shuffle Along"* copped a 2017 Grammy Award for Bloom and for Richard Carlin's liner notes, which provided a history of the 1921 all-black show *Shuffle Along* and its various recordings—and led to a biography of Eubie Blake by Bloom and Carlin, newly published by Oxford University Press. Bloom has written a dozen more books in the field, and Rudman produces and hosts the popular show *On the Aisle* for SiriusXM on Broadway and is artistic director of The Musical Theater Project.

Upcoming Harbinger releases include *David Jenness: Forgotten Gems from Stage and Screen* and *Harvey Schmidt: Merry Christmas* (featuring jazz-

imbued piano renditions of some of the late composer's favorite songs). In the pipeline are *Hidden Treasures* from Gretchen Cryer and Nancy Ford, and songs from a little-known 1960s collaboration by Harold Arlen and Martin Charnin.

"In our 37 years of celebrating musical theater song, we have seen so many labels come and go. Why are we still here? High quality and—quite frankly—our tenacity and love for the material," said Rudman.

During this time of pandemic and loss, this niche record label is providing a bit of sweetness and light for music lovers everywhere. ○

Editor's note

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