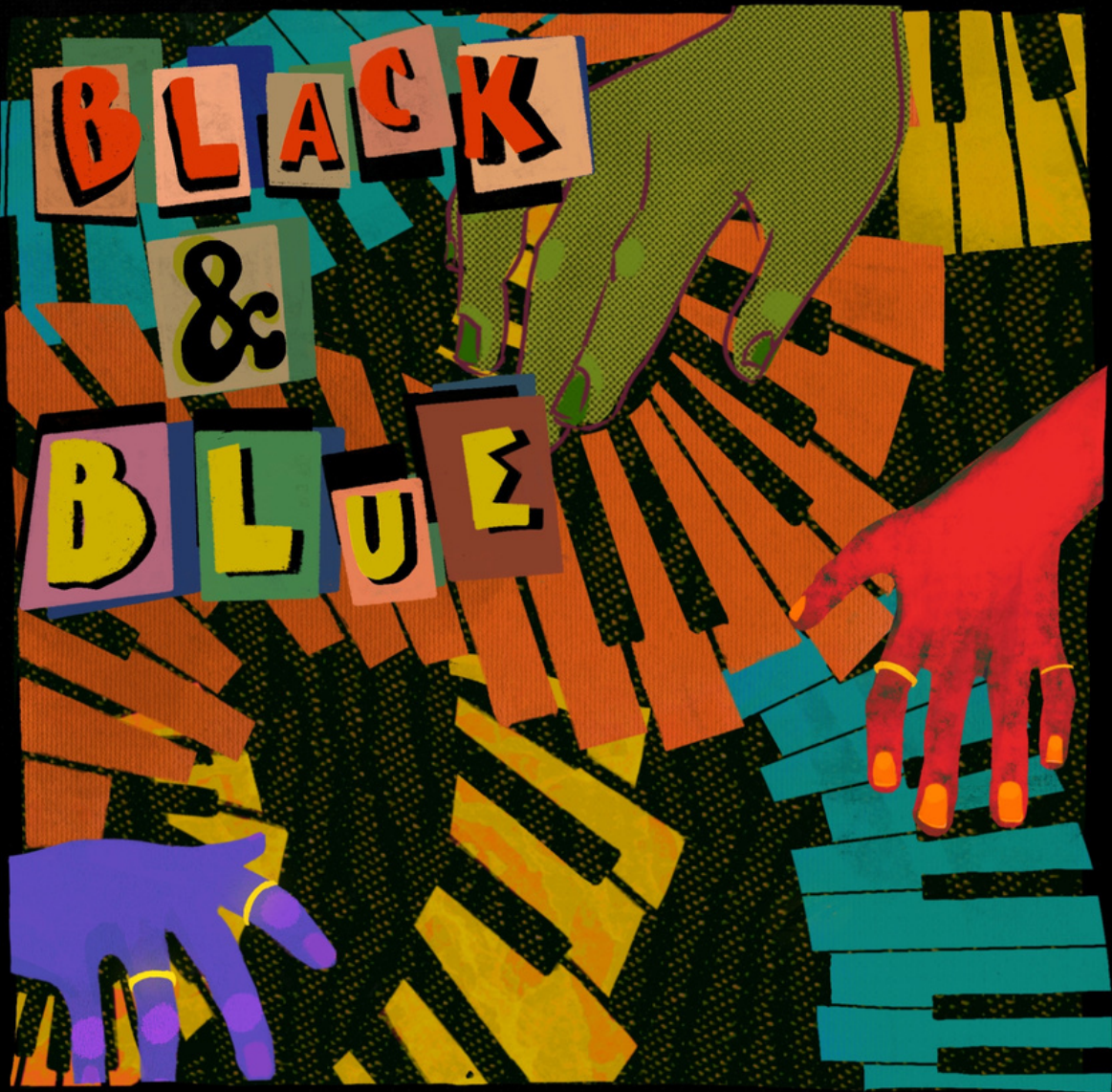


BLACK

&

BLUE



JOSHUA BLUE AND STEVEN BLIER

PROGRAM NOTES

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY STEVEN BLIER

In the winter of 2017, many of us were still reeling from the recent election. In response, I was planning a Juilliard show simply called PROTEST, a program of songs from many countries that put the growing Black Lives Matter protests into the long history of artist activism. I cast Joshua Blue in the vocal ensemble, and asked him to have a look at “Black and Blue” by the legendary “Fats” Waller. Josh was new to Juilliard, politically progressive and outspoken, and I didn’t know how his 21st-century sensibility would respond to the complexities of Andy Razaf’s 1929 lyrics. Josh brought it into a coaching session, and proceeded to deliver a stunning first reading that left me speechless.

The song has a fascinating history. In 1929 the much-feared mobster “Dutch” Schultz was trying his hand at producing a Broadway review, *Hot Chocolate*. He confronted the show’s lyricist, Andy Razaf, in a bar, and ordered him at gunpoint to write a “comic song about how hard it was to be Black.” Razaf had no choice but to agree, and came up with this fascinating, multi-layered lament. Waller, his writing partner, set the lyrics to a slow, minor-key melody. On opening night the audience initially reacted with nervous laughter, but they soon felt the impact of the song, awarding it an ovation. At the end of the performance, Schultz gave Razaf a quick nod—applause can be very persuasive—and Razaf escaped with his life.

After Josh Blue sang it that day, I joked, “You know, ‘Black and Blue’ would be a great title for our first CD,” We laughed—but when we launched NYFOS Records in 2021, “Black and Blue” rose to the top of the wish list.

Since then Josh and I have steadily added to our repertoire in several more NYFOS programs, one devoted to Harlem’s thriving gay scene in the mid-20th century, and the other to the composer and publisher W. C. Handy. Those three concerts provided much of the rep heard in this recording, including two wonderful songs that are receiving their first-ever recordings: “Negrita” and “Freedom Train.” Both of them had been languishing in library stacks.

“Negrita” is a sizzling rumba that Handy published in 1935; he supplied the lyrics to a tune by Al D’Artega. Handy’s career as the self-proclaimed “Father of the Blues” has rightly become the stuff of legends—if he had done nothing more than write “St. Louis Blues” and “Memphis Blues” his place in history would have been assured. Mexican-born D’Artega, alas, has slipped through the cracks. (His name is even misspelled on the sheet music for “Negrita,”) He enjoyed a good

career, conducting pops concerts at Carnegie Hall with the New York Philharmonic and concerts for Radio Italiana in Milan and Rome. One of his songs, “In the Blue of the Evening,” was a Tommy Dorsey hit. But his most famous composition is the NBC Chimes theme, three notes that are as much of an ear worm as the irresistible “Negrita.”

Langston Hughes’s 1947 poem “Freedom Train” took its inspiration from a project proposed by then-Attorney General Tom C. Clark, who felt that American morale needed a boost in the post-war era. He formed a board of directors and loaded a number of important American documents onto a red, white, and blue train that toured the 48 states. Using the services of an advertising firm, they aimed to “sell America to Americans.” People across the country could look at a letter from Christopher Columbus, the Emancipation Proclamation, and documents of the German and Japanese surrender at the end of World War II. Avoiding anything that could cause controversy, they presented artifacts aimed at uniting the crowds that came through the train.

Those crowds were integrated almost everywhere the train stopped, but Birmingham and Memphis refused to allow Blacks and whites to mingle. This set off enormous controversy, and inspired Langston Hughes to write his poem. The composer Thomas Hayward (best known for his song “Honey Man”) set Hughes’s words to music in a familiar American ballad style. The song was never recorded, nor is there any record of a performance since its publication. But when Joshua Blue and I premiered “Freedom Train” in 2019, the song brought down the house. The vivid message about voting rights and equality, combined with the simple authenticity of the music, struck a profound note with the audience. “Freedom Train” may have waited 73 years for its first performance, and another four years for its day in the recording studio, but it has lost none of its power.

Some of the rep on *Black and Blue* comes from the canon—the title song, of course, and Paul Simon’s “American Tune,” as well as “Strange Fruit” by Lewis Allen (né Abel Meeropol). They remain as piercingly relevant as the day they were written. Josh was passionate about including “Strange Fruit,” written in 1937 and considered by some to mark the beginning of the civil rights movement. Our arrangement pays tribute to one of our heroes, the great Nina Simone. I was the one to propose “American Tune”; written in 1975, it captures the weary sense of betrayal and bewilderment so many of us feel in the era of “alternative facts”—but also the resolve of Martin Luther King, who counseled, “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”

That thought finds its Argentinean counterpart in Maria Walsh’s “Como la cicada.”

When she first wrote the song in 1972, she meant to describe the vicissitudes of an artist's life - "Sometimes you're very well known, people adore you, and then the next day nobody knows you, no one loves you." The pendulum swings, but the work continues. A decade later its significance changed. Now it became an anthem, a hymn to the indomitable spirit of the Argentinean people re-emerging after decades of fascist domination. The sweetness of her melody, with a refrain like a children's song, belies the adult philosophy of her lyric.

The political message in Stevie Wonder's 1972 song "Big Brother" is more explicit—and more intentional. Two of Stevie Wonder's early record producers had taken to reading him sections of books, among them George Orwell's 1984. In that novel, of course, "Big Brother" is the sinister surveillance tool of a totalitarian government, tracking all of its the citizens and feeding them propaganda. Since his schooldays Wonder had been fascinated by the way advanced cultures disintegrated, and he saw how this would be inevitable in America. Such a downfall would not need to come from a revolution—"the people are not power players," Wonder stated—but rather, the rich and powerful would bring about the demise of their own country. "We don't have to do anything to them." Once again, a happy-go-lucky dance tune is the medium for a sock to the gut—one of Stevie Wonder's most original inspirations.

In our recent concerts Josh and I have had a blast exploring the American blues tradition. Our concert devoted to W. C. Handy led us not just to "Negrita," but also to his 1914 "Yellow Dog Blues." A contemporary audience would have known instantly that Handy's song referenced a hit from the previous year, Shelton Brooks's "I Wonder Where My Easy Rider's Gone." Handy's tune finally answered the question: he's left town for good. An "easy rider" could either signify "gentleman caller" or "pimp," depending on the context. Handy borrowed some of Brooks's refrain for the beginning section, and then tops his colleague with a catchier, more creative refrain—a Mississippi Delta classic.

For our Gay Harlem show we turned to the songs of another blues great: the long-forgotten Gladys Bentley, a cross-dressing blues artist with a voice of Wagnerian force and a devilish wit. Clad in white, tailor-made men's suits and sporting a white top-hat and cane, her piano-playing, her frankness about relationships, her ability to improvise hilariously scandalous lyrics, her overt womanizing, and her bold, non-conforming gender identity made her a star of the Harlem Renaissance. For many years she was forgotten—unlike the iconic Ethel Waters, Bentley made no movies or TV appearances to secure her place in the modern world. But in 2019 the New York Times included her in a series about overlooked Black men and women who never received an obituary in their paper. Soon after I saw her face

waving on a banner near my home during Black History Month—this rowdy, gifted self-declared “male impersonator” was finally enjoying her place in the Pantheon. Josh and I offer “Red Beans and Rice” in Bentley’s original key, inspired by her clarion abandon.

That kind of musical abandon can be earthy, but it can also express religious fervor when unleashed on spirituals. For Hall Johnson’s zesty version of “Ride On, King Jesus,” we added a couple of string players for extra brilliance and weight, while preserving the elegance of Johnson’s original. But after a bit of soul-searching I decided to give Moses Hogan’s arrangement of “Walk Together, Children” a face-lift. The vocal line fit Josh’s voice like a glove, but Hogan’s piano writing didn’t support the excitement I felt when he sang it. I finally decided to give my hands permission to go where they wanted to go, and replaced Hogan’s piano arrangement with my own—a bit more rambunctious, but straight from my soul.

The CD wouldn’t be complete without a love song or two, and Billy Strayhorn’s “Day Dream” is one of the most beautiful in the American Songbook. He brought a long-lined *bel canto* spirit to mid-century jazz, which was so often built on nervous, darting rhythms—the ants in your pants that make you dance. Strayhorn is the Vincenzo Bellini of the Big Band era, with arching melodies that suspend themselves over sensual harmonies like a long sigh. “Day Dream” gets my nomination for Most Beautiful Chord Progression in an American Popular Song, as opulent and dappled as anything Fauré ever wrote. And John LaTouche’s lyric captures the early stages of sexual attraction with poetic sensitivity.

To finish off the CD, we offer a bonus track: Harry Warren’s “At Last.” Josh had been lobbying to add the song to our list from the first day of our sessions, and the answer was always the same: “if we have time.” We were on a tight schedule and I assumed I would be off the hook, but we managed to wrap things up an hour early on our last day, and Josh got his wish. With only the sketchiest of rehearsals, we knocked off two complete takes and chose the second for the disc—no edits. I could tell that this bonus track was important to Josh, and asked him to explain. He wrote me:

“When I was a senior in high school they had a competition à la Miss America, called ‘Mr. WVHS’ (Waubonsie Valley High School). For the talent portion of the competition I decided to play and sing ‘At Last.’ Being the person I am, I chose to perform it in drag: a kitten heel, sparkly blue dress, earrings, and a short blonde wig adorned my person, underneath a big pink fuzzy bathrobe (because we love a reveal!).

“It was my first time experimenting with understanding who I am, playing with

gender, picking music that I wanted to sing because I wanted to sing it, not because I was told to. If I had to pick a moment in my life that could be considered the start of my artistic journey I think that would be it. It was the first time I made music for the sake of making music, nothing more, nothing less."

Josh's operatic schedule is peppered with productions of *La Bohème* and *Rigoletto* in major American houses. But for his first solo CD, he preferred "a celebration of the music that shaped me as an artist before opera was even a blip on my radar. These are the songs and musical styles that helped make me...well, me." He added, "It is also an opportunity to share the magic that happens when Steve and I perform together." That is music to my ears. I too revel in my incandescent partnership with Joshua Blue, and together with some of New York's best musicians, we offer a program that both celebrates America and holds it to account.