

KENDRA SHANK

A SPIRIT FREE: ABBEY LINCOLN SONGBOOK

LINER NOTES BY GARY GIDDINS:

Any project as innovative and eagerly-awaited as this one is bound to cause a bit of apprehension: Can it be as good as it ought to be and what exactly ought it to be? How much individuality can a singer bring to songs so intimately associated with their maker? In the words of an Abbey Lincoln song: “Not to Worry.” Kendra Shank’s *A Spirit Free: Abbey Lincoln Songbook* is a triumph of homage and personality—a meeting of minds.

Abbey’s fabled career is too well documented to require much rehearsal here: she has been a jazz singer for half a century (*Abbey Lincoln’s Affair* appeared in 1956), a film star, and a powerful voice for civility and civil rights. Yet not until the 1990s did she begin to receive recognition as an outstanding songwriter, words and music. *A Spirit Free* is the first album by another singer devoted exclusively to the Abbey Lincoln songbook. It won’t be the last, but it will remain the standard by which its successors are measured.

Kendra broached the idea for the album in March 2002, after Abbey’s magnificent triptych of concerts at Lincoln Center. Those performances served to display the diversity and ingenuity of her catalog while throwing down a gauntlet to those who would explore it. Whatever qualms Kendra had were allayed when she asked permission of Abbey, who pointed out that nothing is more “valedictory” for a composer than for others to perform her songs.

By that time, they were already friends. Kendra, an accomplished guitarist (you can hear her play it on her albums *Afterglow* and *Reflections* and on “Blackberry Blossoms” on Abbey’s album, *Over the Years*), began her career 30 years ago as a teenage folk singer, busking in Paris. After a brief detour into bluegrass, she experienced a Billie Holiday epiphany and determined to sing jazz. She added classic ballads to her repertory while working in Paris, and sat in with bands, learning by doing. In 1989, she began studying with the pioneering jazz vocalist and educator Jay Clayton, in Seattle. Kendra met Abbey at Jay’s 1993 Thanksgiving dinner and heard her perform, an experience she has likened to “a religious

experience.” Abbey later befriended Kendra in New York, and urged her to persevere.

As Kendra immersed herself in Abbey’s songs for this album, she decided to stop listening to her records and focus on the lead sheets that Abbey had given her. A few of the songs had been in her repertory for years, but as Kendra studied the written music she grew increasingly mindful of their intricacy and compositional detail. As Kendra points out, only two songs included in this selection, **A Circle of Love** and **Natas**, are based on the standard 32-bar construction.

Abbey subordinates form to music, not vice versa, with the result that her songs combine stanzas of varying length, multiple verses, and metrical shifts. In a few cases, she has written a single measure in a different meter than the rest of the piece. For example **I Got Thunder** has one measure in 2/4: The phrase leading into the refrain is parsed as follows: “I got thunder [in four] and it [in two] rings [in four].” In the luminous and tricky **Down Here Below**, one measure is in three: “I pray my soul will find me [in four] shining in the morning [in three] light [in four].”

The important thing here, however, is the effect that these songs have had on Kendra: never has the sheer beauty of her instrument been better captured or pushed to a deeper level of engagement with her material. There are passages in this set where she achieves power only hinted at in earlier work. The subtleties and freshness of her renderings, emotionally and technically, demand repeated listening. They are that good.

One measure of the album’s success stems from her close association with the members of her band, especially pianist Frank Kimbrough, who has appeared on all but her first album—which, significantly, was co-produced by the woman who subsequently brought them together, Shirley Horn. During Horn’s 1992 stay at the Village Vanguard, she invited Kendra to sing a few numbers—it was her first performance in New York—and recommended Kimbrough as her accompanist. The

musicians Kendra assembled for these sessions are all among New York's first-call elite, and they provide an accompaniment as fully engaged and at times surprising as it is supportive.

Music is the Magic and Incantation/Throw It Away open with chants, a part of Kendra's performances that originated as an exercise in inventing her own musical language. The former is the "freest" performance on the album: rhythmically built on the 5/4 ostinato Kendra introduces on kalimba and harmonically wed to a B-flat minor mode, though the song's chords are alluded to by the band. She never actually states the written melody, but it is always implied. **Throw It Away** is approached almost as if it was a percussion piece—Kimbrough dampens the piano strings to create a marimba effect.

I Got Thunder begins with a double-time attack (note Dean Johnson's bass) until the half-time piano solo (fleet and bluesy with dabs of Monk), which the band sustains until Kendra kicks it back to speed. Billy Drewes's tenor is like a shadow during her vocal and Tony Moreno's drums fastidiously define the rhythmic changeups. She closes on a long full-moon note. Abbey recorded **Not to Worry** in four, but Kendra has made it a waltz in six, an alteration that allows her to emphasize the appealing chord changes. **Circle of Love**, which Kendra has said makes her cry, evolved in live performances into a gentle swinger—a classic tempo you don't often hear handled with such confidence. Although **Bird Alone** was written for Miles Davis, both the composer and her interpreter eventually found it applied to them as well. Kendra almost always performs it as a voice-bass duet.

Down Here Below, which Kendra calls Abbey's "all-time masterpiece," is undoubtedly a highlight of the album—for the unusual blend of Gary Versace's accordion and Drewes's bass clarinet as well as Kendra's forthright timbre and range, which really shine here. One of her most inventive adaptations is **Wholly Earth**: It involves an extended long-meter episode before turning into a pulsing samba (in four, Kendra points out, not two like a real samba). Frank created the eight-bar vamp that ties the first section to the second ("Life's a repetition, it's an action of repeat"), which serves as the foundation for solos. Kendra's co-producer Andy Rowan reminded her of **Natas**, a song she says "honors your own childlike spirit and guiding voice without being corny or New Age-y." On the spur of

the moment, she added scat counterpoint to the accordion, accenting the song's Gallic chanson quality. **Being Me**, perhaps the finest of Abbey's self-reflective ballads, required a leap of faith for Kendra to feel she could make it her own.

The World Is Falling Down is the title song of the 1990 album that kindled a new flame in Abbey's career, and may well do the same for Kendra, who really lets her hair down in this exceptional performance. It also exemplifies the musical ESP between her and Frank. They had decided to treat it as a waltz, yet he launched a far slower tempo than she expected. Kendra, who always envisioned the song as having a country flavor, took the challenge and found that it inspired her to dig deep into her roots. That mood is augmented in the episode featuring Drewes and Monder, a masterly tenor/guitar interlude that starts in left field and drives straight home. This was the first song she knew she would put on the album—it had become for her and others a kind of 9/11 anthem—and Kendra paces herself for a triumphant climax.

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