

KENDRA SHANK

A SPIRIT FREE: ABBEY LINCOLN SONGBOOK

NOTES FROM KENDRA SHANK:

Abbey Lincoln is one of the great songwriters. She writes (and sings) about our lives with intelligence, compassion, spiritual depth, and wisdom. For me, they are healing songs in a time when the world seems to have lost its way; songs that celebrate the human spirit and remind us who we are.

Like her art, Abbey's friendship is a profound source of inspiration, support, and guidance for which I am deeply grateful. She has encouraged me not to limit my music to any genre and to embrace all of my musical roots. She frequently reminds me that an artist's job is to speak truth.

I began singing some of Abbey's songs, at her invitation, in 1994. Over the years I added more and more of them to my book, recorded a few on my albums *Wish* and *Reflections*, and thought that some day I might record an entire program of them. A suggestion from Gary Giddins made me realize: why wait? So I set forth on this journey that took me to surprising places within myself, revealing new sounds and colors.

Most of the arrangements evolved organically on my monthly gigs at the 55 Bar in Manhattan, and I'm grateful to my band mates for their artistry, generosity, and collaborative spirit. Frank, Dean, Tony, and I have been playing as an ensemble for eight years and I love the intuitive interplay and high level of trust we have. Billy, Ben and Gary fit right in, as if they'd always played with us. We recorded the songs live as a group (with a few percussion overdubs) and the arrangements were open and fluid to allow for surprises and to ensure space for each musician to express his unique personality. Here are some thoughts on just a few of them:

The Music Is The Magic: I bought a kalimba one day from a street vendor and, while playing around with it, found the 5/4 ostinato that became the motif for this arrangement. It alludes to world music influences without being culturally specific and reflects, for me, the universality of music. The opening vocal improvisation employs a "personal language" that I improvise to express what can't be expressed with words, inspired by an exercise taught by vocal improviser Rhiannon. I also use it

on my improvised piece **Incantation**, which serves as a prologue to Abbey's **Throw It Away**.

The World Is Falling Down: When the World Trade Center towers fell, my neighborhood was covered in ash, and the disbelief and horror of that day brought this song's refrain to mind: "The world is falling down, hold my hand..." I love the circus-like vibe of Ben and Billy's duet chorus, which seems to express the absurdities of life.

Down Here Below: This masterpiece of Abbey's made me think of the old British Isles ballads I sang in my early years as a folk singer/guitarist. I kept hearing in my head the lonely sound of a concertina combined with a woodwind. Gary's accordion and Billy's bass clarinet provided those colors, Dean's bass set the mood, and Frank brought the arrangement to perfection by suggesting we add piano and drums (Tony's toms are perfect). Billy's solo just curls my toes.

Profound thanks to Abbey Lincoln for her wonderful songs, her encouragement and enthusiasm, and for providing lead sheets. It's an honor to sing your songs, Abbey.

Deep thanks to Frank, Dean, Tony, Billy, Ben and Gary for their dedication, support and beautiful playing, with special thanks to Frank and Tony for assistance with the mixing. To Andy Rowan for his ears, clarity, guidance, and going way above and beyond. To Lou Holtzman and Michael MacDonald for the sound, and to Anne de Jong and Marcel van den Broek at Challenge Records for believing in this project.

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