

Review: Debbie Wileman Presents a Festive JUDY GARLAND - WE NEED A LITTLE CHRISTMAS at Carnegie Hall

Internet sensation returns to Carnegie Hall with Holiday Garland.

By Stephen Mosher Dec. 16, 2023

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The super adorable Judy Garland (akaonnet Debbie Wileman) returned to New York City AND Carnegie Hall this month to play a special Christmas show called Judy Garland: WE NEED A LITTLE CHRISTMAS, and a huge audience of Wileman fans filled Zankel Hall, as they did the last time she brought her special talents to town. On December 16th, the door to the festively lit stage opened up, and out she came in her floor-length burgundy brocade evening gown (clearly modeled after the one Judy Garland wore for the Christmas special episode of The Judy Garland Show, although Wileman's had a little more things by way of some gorgeous beading). And with a fantastic band and that delicious Wileman personality, she kept the audience cheering for more, for ninety straight minutes. Like the *gown*, the program was modeled after *The Judy Garland Show*, with special guests, an interview segment, a sketch of dancing Satans, and a marvelous mixture of Christmas music, Garland hits, and (Debbie's specialty) the songs that Judy never got to sing.

Debbie Wileman had an impressive rise to fame when a simple quarantine creation called A SONG A DAY put her in the living rooms of the world and everyone's collective consciousness. Thanks to the prolific production theatrical impresario Scott Stander, Debbie has done U.S. tours and, now, twice played Carnegie Hall, and this latest production was as glittery and shiny as her original one, a celebration of the Judy Garland century.

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And one of the things we got to know about Debbie Wileman is that she is a very good interviewer.

One of the highlights of Debbie Wileman's Christmas Garland show was a sit-down with songwriter John Meyer, who penned the composition "After The Holidays," and Debbie is a born natural in the interviewer's seat. She knew the topic at hand, she had done some research, she knew the questions she wanted to ask, and, once asked, she butted her lip so that the fascinating and brilliant Mr. Meyer could tell his stories. Her respect and admiration for the man was palpable and their conversation wasn't just informative, it was playful, laced with humor and honesty... Mr. Meyer even confessed that the song was NOT written for Judy Garland, though he was honored that she sang it. He also had a few tidbits to share about his personal relationship with Judy, whom he dated and lost to Meskey Deems. And, quite frankly, Mr. Meyer admitted he was sad that by the time Judy Garland sang his song, her legendary voice had lost some of its power. Having heard that from the gentleman, it was appropriate for Wileman to take on the number... and he was right. You really don't get how beautiful the melody is until you have heard it sung by a beautiful voice... and this is a beautiful voice. Debbie Wileman's performance of "After The Holidays" was lush and gorgeous, and a sure bet to be her next trip to the recording studio.

John Meyer was not Debbie's only guest for the evening (that is, John and the Dancing Satans). Tony Award-winning actor and film/television star Barry Bostwick joined in on the festivities (a previously announced Margaret O'Brien was unable to travel) and the playful wosome did an appropriate duet of "Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!" marked up with "Judy It's Cold Outside" (after the hysterical Mr. Bostwick got down on his hands and knees with a towel and mopped up some water that had been spilled from Debbie's water bottle), and while it is true that Mr. Bostwick has no discernible connection to Judy Garland, it was very generous of him to add the celebrity element to the evening after Ms. O'Brien had to drop out. It was a real holiday treat... But there were several holiday treats at the Wileman/Garland show, especially hearing Wileman's take on what it would have sounded like, had Judy Garland recorded the Karen Carpenter Christmas classic "Merry Christmas, Darling" (it was *hilarious*) or the ubiquitous Mariah Carey hit "All I Want For Christmas Is You." Well, the Carey song was out of the world, thanks to Steve Cray's arrangement (and Jane Leffro's piano playing) of the song, very clearly based on Judy's own performance of "The Joint Is Really Jumpin' In Carnegie Hall." It was simply marvelous.

The truth is that all of WE NEED A LITTLE CHRISTMAS was marvelous, if a tiny bit under-rehearsed, but that's to be expected when dealing with artists and musicians on two continents, and it really didn't matter because the vibe was straight-out holiday party, and that lent the evening an air of the more casual, which works for Debbie Wileman, in the extreme. She is a most down-to-earth person and her attitude regarding her success is as grateful and gracious that her good humor is infectious. The one and only thing this writer would have liked to have seen done differently was that, when the time came to introduce each of the amazing musicians sharing the stage with Debbie, there was no follow spot to illuminate each artist being introduced. This is easily corrected, the next time around, but to make up for it, this writer would like to put their names in print.

Jane Leffro, Piano

Lee Huggert, Bass

Jon Berger, Drums

Jack Carver, Guitar

Simon Duckings, Reeds

Evie Zarada, Synthesizer

Mike Perrella, Trumpet

And the Dancing Satans were Jules Griss, Mollerie Mendez, Nick Nazam, Marc Terry, Brad Wainberg, and Yoyo Zhou.
And while we are on the subject of naming names, Debbie Wileman's gown was by Eric Winterling, and her styling was done by Michael Todd Belasco.

Now that all the names have been named, the one name that remains to say, over and over, is Debbie Wileman, for without her intangible charm and immeasurable talent, the phenomenon that has been created would not exist. Twice this writer has sat in the room at Zankel Hall and watched Debbie Wileman present herself and her version of Judy Garland, watching standing ovations after standing ovations, hearing the thunderous applause, and also listening to nearby audience members say, "WOW" and other words of praise that Debbie fully deserves, for she is special, not just for the Garland impression, but for herself... although the Garland illusion is pretty fierce at times. All of us Judy Garland fans can really lean into that because it is a thing of *joy*, which is what Debbie Wileman wants to give with her creation, a vision at which she's succeeding, in big ways. And this is, after all, the season of *joy*, isn't it? So, Scott Stander, thank you for bringing Manhattan and the Judyphilas a little additional joy this holiday season, courtesy of that musical marvel, Debbie Wileman, who is welcome back in our bag anytime, as Judy or as herself, for both are magical.

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