

- 1 Intro (Spoken): Meet Me At The Lighthouse 0:47
- 2 Convergence 5:12
- 3 The Stars On Second Avenue 5:09
- 4 Spoken Intro: Hot Summer Night 1:13
- 5 Hot Summer Night 3:36
- 6 Spoken Intro: Pity The Beautiful 0:50
- 7 Pity The Beautiful 5:09
- 8 Spoken Intro: Too Bad 0:44
- 9 Too Bad 5:20
- 10 Lament for Kalief Browder 7:18
- 11 Into the Unknown 5:40
- 12 Touch 3:44
- 13 CODA (Spoken): Touch 0:38
- 14 In The Shadowland 5:40
- 15 Spoken Intro: Mean What You Say 0:59
- 16 Mean What You Say 4:22

Total Length: 56:31



Helen Sung – piano, Fender Rhodes, organ
 Dana Gioia – spoken word
 John Ellis – tenor and soprano sax, bass clarinet
 Ingrid Jensen – trumpet
 Reuben Rogers – bass
 Kendrick Scott – drums
 Samuel Torres – percussion

Guest vocalists

Jean Baylor – tracks 3, 7
 Christie Dashiell – track 5, 9, 12, 16
 Carolyn Leonhart – track 5, 9, 10
 Charenee Wade – track 16

Co-produced by Helen Sung and Darryl Harper
www.helensung.com

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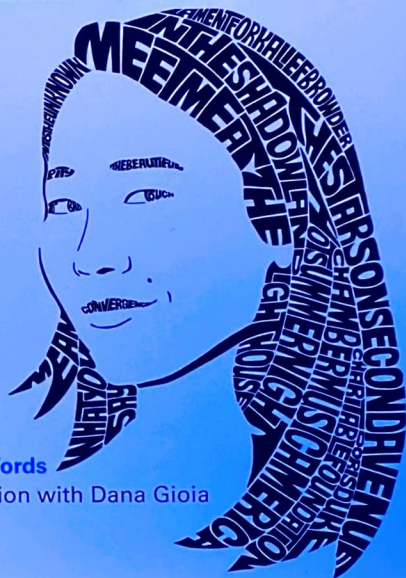
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STRICKER STREET

Sung With Words (A Collaboration with Dana Gioia)

SSR-1002



Helen Sung

Sung With Words

A Collaboration with Dana Gioia

David R. Adler

When I look back on the Helen Sung gigs I attended in my New York years, I can see in them a chronicle of the breadth and excellence of the scene as a whole. One night was solo piano, standards and new originals, at the Fazioli salon in midtown, with sound as pristine as you can imagine. Then came her evening of duets with Ron Carter — how many pianists can pull this off? — at the Rubin Museum farther downtown: sublime swing, unmatched acoustics, and the premiere of a new suite inspired by the Rubin's Himalayan art collections. A few years on at the Kitano, near Grand Central, Sung led a trio with Reuben Rogers and Lewis Nash, galloping into "My Shining Hour" with a fire and casual brilliance that brought me right back to Bradley's in the '80s and '90s.

It's long been clear that Sung, a product of the youthful jazz wave of her native Houston, Texas, is a pianist of the highest caliber, steeped in blues and post-bop eloquence, with a great affinity for Monk, equally able to deal with James P. Johnson and Jelly Roll Morton. She knows the tradition on that level. But with her 2001 debut *Push* and subsequent efforts (*Helenistique*, *Sungbird* (after Albeniz), *Going Express*, [Re] *Conception*, *Anthem for a New Day*), she's also proved to be a gifted composer and bandleader, always looking to expand her conceptual framework and sonic palette.

When I last saw her at Mezzrow, in the West Village, Sung was exploring vocal jazz in an inspired duo set with Carolyn Leonhart — one of four singers who would go on to participate in this album, *Sung With Words*.

Accompanying Leonhart with a rare sensitivity and strength, Sung gave a hint of what was to come: an ambitious album-length statement with Leonhart as well as the fine vocalists Jean Baylor, Christie Dashiell and Charenee Wade, playing new music written in collaboration with the award-winning poet Dana Gioia. Alternating Gioia's spoken-word readings with compositions of sterling clarity and imagination, *Sung With Words* is a bold new step in the pianist's evolution.

In some ways this album can be said to build on the intricate two-horn writing and rich ensemble color of *Anthem for a New Day*, from 2014. Trumpeter Ingrid Jensen appears on both records, as do bassist Reuben Rogers and percussionist Samuel Torres. Saxophonist John Ellis, a central voice throughout *Sung With Words*, played bass clarinet on *Anthem* and does so again here on "Lament for Kalief Browder," one of three standalone instrumental pieces.

A haunting and powerful work, "Lament" refers to an infamous case of systemic injustice at New York's Riker's Island prison. Sung names Charles Mingus as a role model in this regard: "I've been playing in the Mingus Big Band for a while now, and I've come to deeply appreciate how socially engaged he was. Especially with what's going in our world right now, I think about how being an artist is a privilege, and I can't just be happily oblivious. I want to speak to my time and bring attention to things that should be highlighted and not forgotten."

Sung clarifies that the instrumentals on *Sung With Words* still relate to poetry, in that they're "music inspired by words": "Lament" was directly inspired by Jennifer Gonnerman's landmark *New Yorker* article on the Browder tragedy, while "In the Shadowland" comes from a melancholy passage by C.S. Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. "Into the Unknown," the very first piece Sung wrote for the project, is her meditation on getting started and facing up to the challenge.

This varied and at times devastatingly complex music is given masterful treatment by drummer Kendrick Scott, a fellow Houstonian, who makes his first appearance on a Helen Sung album here. "I knew Kendrick had the range that this record was going to need," Sung says. "He has all the swing and tradition but also all the nuance and color that I love about his playing."

Sung was never an avid reader of poetry, but meeting and talking with Dana Gioia wrought a change in her perspective. "People sometimes say they don't understand jazz," she confides, "and it's ironic because that's how I used to feel about poetry. Dana really unlocked that for me. He emphasized that it's actually a temporal art like music, and you're supposed to hear it out loud. That was a revelation."

The affinity between jazz and poetry stretches back to Langston Hughes and others writing in the "Jazz Age" of the '20s, forward to the Beat

Generation and up to today. Poets played a central role in the '60s avant-garde and free jazz, not to mention the current intertwined exchange between jazz and hip-hop. In recent years, Andrew Rathbun has composed works inspired by Margaret Atwood; Luciana Souza by Neruda and Elizabeth Bishop; John Hollenbeck by Kenneth Patchen — the list goes on.

Sung and Gioia step gamely into this arena, and for Gioia the musical connections already run deep: he was once an aspiring composer himself, and a working classical music critic; as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts from 2003-2009 he was a tireless advocate for jazz. (His younger brother Ted Gioia is a prolific and highly respected jazz author.) He has also written libretti, and there might well be a correlation between that and his work on *Sung With Words*.

Gioia's recorded voice, from the first moment of "Meet Me at the Lighthouse," is riveting, set apart from the music yet somehow a part of it. The Sung composition that follows is an instrumental — "Convergence," a bristling minor blues in AAB form — that is still directly linked to the poem that precedes it. "I wrote a song based on what it evoked for me," Sung explains. "Converging through time, through space."

Pinning down a track sequence for *Sung With Words* was meticulous work, and part of the album's inherent creativity. In most cases Gioia

reads first, and a sole instrument or voice will creep in under him just before he finishes, setting the stage for the band's entrance and the singers' melodic recasting of the same words. With "Too Bad," however, Sung accompanies the whole reading on Fender Rhodes straight through. The effect is like a loose impromptu vocalese on some imaginary bandstand. The mysterious rubato reverie "Touch" yields another contrast: Christie Dashiell renders the poem first in song, then Gioia recapitulates it, almost like a benediction.

Throughout the set one hears a strong groove and R&B influence, along with Afro-Latin elements, hard uncompromising swing and at times writing that could be called orchestral. "I don't think that's the wrong word," Sung says. "I was in youth symphonies and played violin up to the day I graduated high school, so the whole symphonic repertoire is still swirling in there." At this writing she plans to complete the last of a three-year opportunity to write for big band with the BMI Jazz Composers Workshop, and she was recently commissioned to write for string quartet as well. "I like a lot of different colors and textures," she adds, "and this project gave me the freedom to explore it."

From the start Sung knew she needed two vocalists: much of the poetry seemed to lend itself to call-and-response, trading and other duet-like devices. "I planned two singers and I got double," Sung quips, "and I'm super pleased." Leonhart is a longtime touring member of Steely Dan and a talented leader in her own right. Baylor, wife of drummer Marcus

Baylor and co-leader of The Baylor Project, crossed paths with Sung while sitting in with the late Kevin Mahogany, and Sung immediately recognized her from her performance on Kenny Garrett's Happy People. Christie Dashiell came through Baylor's recommendation and had just the right soulful, expressive tone for the project. Charenee Wade, who'd worked with Sung in Terri Lyne Carrington's Mosaic Project and clarinetist Oran Etkin's Benny Goodman tribute, entered late in the process but left her indelible mark along with Dashiell on the celebratory finale "Mean What You Say."

The poems' inflections and emotional landscapes, and how they're woven into Sung's compositions, can be left for you, the listener, to discern. "Dana told me, 'Don't worry too much about literal meaning,'" Sung remembers, on how she overcame doubts and found her footing. "He would say, 'Read the poem out loud, listen to how the words fall rhythmically, listen to the consonants, and the meaning's going to come at you sideways.'" More than likely, what worked for her will work for you as well. Enjoy.

Athens, Georgia
July 2018

Dana Gioia

When jazz was the world's most popular music, it presented vocal and instrumental works on equal terms. Artists moved easily between the two modes. Often they combined them. How many of the great instrumental solos appeared on vocal tracks—from Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke to Lester Young and Stan Getz. Over the last half century, however, song has gradually disappeared. Jazz has become a mostly instrumental art.

Songs were part of jazz's popular appeal. For many, they provided an entrance into jazz. Lyrics are poetry in its most primal forms—words heightened into music. Words give specific meanings to the music. They trigger memories and emotions.

When Helen Sung and I first met, we had many long conversations about jazz and poetry. I don't think either of us expected we might collaborate on songs. We were simply sharing our passions. Soon Helen wrote her first songs based on words by various poets, including Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, and me. After doing a small concert together in Boston, we decided to create a jazz song cycle.

As a poet, I was excited and intrigued to write jazz songs. Our project allowed me to write a different sort of poem—more direct, emotional, and musical than work conceived for the page. Lyrics need to grab the listener's attention. They must make an immediate connection. Lyrics also need to be concise and memorable—excellent virtues for any sort

of poem. Strangest of all for a poet, lyrics are written to be sung. The lyricist can only reach the audience through the composer's notes and the singer's voice.

The first lyric I wrote for Helen was "Pity the Beautiful." I wanted to create a poem that was both informal and resonant—rich enough to stand on the page but so fluent it went naturally into song. The other lyrics followed. "The Stars on Second Avenue" was a tribute to the ballads of the American Song Book. "Hot Summer Night" evokes the up-tempo Latin jazz I heard growing up in Los Angeles.

Not all the songs began with the words. They grew in different ways. One day Helen phoned to give me a specific beat and a few chords. That rhythm became "Too Bad." A few weeks later she asked if I could write a lyric in which every stanza ended with "Say What You Mean. Mean What You Say," set to a certain chord progression. It didn't matter whether the music or the words came first. We did whatever worked.

"Meet Me at the Lighthouse" was written as a poem, not a lyric. It celebrates the great West Coast jazz club in Hermosa Beach, California, not far from where I was born and raised. The poem is an elegy. It remembers the Southland jazz stars of my teenage years as well as my late cousin Philip with whom I visited the club. Not everyone will remember that the Lighthouse band was called the All-Stars. Jazz fans will have no trouble identifying the other masters I celebrate—playing with a line by W. B. Yeats—as "The singing-masters of our West Coast soul."