

## KURT ELLING

*Kurt Elling is "the standout male jazz vocalist of our time."* – The New York Times

DEDICATED TO YOU, Kurt Elling's second recording for Concord/Universal, will propel his career to new heights. Elling is an eight-time GRAMMY nominee who has spent the last nine consecutive years at the top of the Down Beat Critics poll and the last four consecutive years winning the Jazz Times Readers' poll. He has won five Jazz Journalists' Association Awards for Best Male Vocalist and the Prix Billie Holiday from the Academie du Jazz in Paris. His quartet tours the world continually, performing to critical acclaim in Europe, the Middle East, South America, Asia and Australia, and at jazz festivals and concert halls across North America.

In addition to leading a regular quartet that features collaborator Laurence Hobgood, Kurt Elling has spent recording and/or performing time with an array of artists that includes Terence Blanchard, Dave Brubeck, The Clayton/Hamilton Orchestra, Benny Golson, Jon Hendricks, Fred Hersch, Charlie Hunter, Al Jarreau, David Liebman, Joe Lovano, Christian McBride, Marian McPartland, The Bob Mintzer Big Band, Mark Murphy, John Pizzarelli, Kurt Rosenwinkel, and The Yellowjackets. He has written multi-disciplinary works of art for The Steppenwolf Theater and by commission for the City of Chicago. Kurt Elling is a former National Trustee and National Vice Chairman of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (The GRAMMYS) and has been artist-in-residence for the Monterey Jazz and the Singapore Music Festivals.

Kurt Elling's rich baritone voice spans four octaves and displays an astonishing technical facility and emotional depth. Elling has an awesome command of rhythm, texture, phrasing, and dynamics, often sounding more like a virtuoso jazz musician than a mere singer. His repertoire ranges from his own compositions to modern interpretations of standards, both of which can be the springboard for free form improvisation, scatting, spoken word and poetry. As composer and lyricist, Elling has written scores of his own compositions and set lyrics to the songs and improvised solos of many jazz masters. In addition to the compositional work he has done with collaborator-in-chief Laurence Hobgood, Elling has collaborated in the creation of new pieces with John Clayton, Fred Hersch, Bob Mintzer, Charlie Hunter and Orbert Davis, among others.

One of Kurt Elling's major contributions is as a writer and performer of vocalese, the art of writing and performing words over the recorded improvised solos of jazz artists. Elling often incorporates images and references from writers such as Rilke, Proust, Kerouac, Rumi, Neruda and Kenneth Rexroth into his work. The natural heir to jazz pioneers Eddie Jefferson, King Pleasure, and Jon Hendricks, Elling is the contemporary voice of vocalese, setting his own deeply spiritual and compelling lyrics to the solos of Wayne Shorter, Keith Jarrett, Dexter Gordon, Pat Metheny, and others. Responding to the work, no less a poet than the late Robert Creeley wrote, "Kurt Elling takes us into a world of sacred particulars. His words are informed by a powerful poetic spirit." Elling's lyrics were published in a book entitled LYRICS by Circumstantial Press in 2007.

Kurt Elling has been featured in profiles for CBS Sunday Morning, for CNN, and in hundreds of newspaper and magazine reviews and articles. The Washington Post declared, "Since the mid-1990s, no singer in jazz has been as daring, dynamic or interesting as Kurt Elling. With his soaring vocal flights, his edgy lyrics and sense of being on a musical mission, he has come to embody the creative spirit in jazz." Said Jazzreview.com, "This is a singer of supreme confidence, a vocalist at the top of his game and a true master of jazz vocalese." The Chicago Tribune decided that "Kurt Elling is going to change many listeners' minds on the meaning and purpose of Jazz singing." The Guardian (UK) declared, "Elling is an omniscient artist of almost ruthless efficiency ... (He) is truly a musical phenomenon." And Jazz Review (UK) raised the possibility that "Elling may be the greatest male Jazz singer of all time."

### - Recordings -

#### **CLOSE YOUR EYES**, 1995 (Blue Note)

Kurt Elling's recording career began at age 27 with the release of "Close Your Eyes." Nine of the thirteen songs on the album were part of a nine-selection demo that was accomplished enough to secure a recording contract with Blue Note. Co-produced by Elling and his collaborator, pianist Laurence Hobgood, the album featured the first incarnation of the Kurt Elling Quartet and introduced many signature aspects of the singer's sound: inspired vocalese versions of jazz compositions and improvised solos ("Dolores Dream," "Those Clouds are Heavy, You Dig," "Hurricane"), the melding of poetry and music, original compositions, and an emotional range from frenetic up-tempo to tender ballads. "Close Your Eyes" secured Elling his first GRAMMY nomination.

## **THE MESSENGER**, 1997 (Blue Note)

The second Blue Note recording, “The Messenger,” began to cement Elling’s critical reputation (along with that of collaborator Laurence Hobgood) as a producer, arranger, and composer. Daring re-workings of the standards “Nature Boy” and “April in Paris” set the stage for a suite of Elling/Hobgood originals and extended vocalese (“Tanya Jean,” “Gingerbread Boy”). Said the Chicago Sun-Times, “More than any mainstream singer to come along in recent times, [Elling] thrives on free expression ... But as much of a wild streak as all this suggests...Elling imparts a sense of being in complete control of his destiny.” In addressing Elling’s writing for this record, The Boston Globe said, “The lyrics (Elling) has written to Dexter Gordon’s ten minute ‘Tanya’ solo are to most attempts at vocalese what an epic poem is to a sonnet.”

## **THIS TIME IT’S LOVE**, 1998 (Blue Note)

Elling’s third recording for Blue Note, “This Time It’s Love,” was a polished and romantic outing. Opening with a treatment of “My Foolish Heart” that has become a staple of Elling’s live shows, the album addresses the theme of love with hip arrangements of jazz standards, new compositions by the Elling/Hobgood team, and more of Elling’s vocalese expansions. Down Beat gave the recording four-and-a-half stars and said, “Again, the singer reveals his grand gift for vocalese lyrics,” calling his lyric to Freddie Hubbard’s classic “Delphia” solo “a superb love paean.” The record won Elling his third consecutive GRAMMY nomination.

## **LIVE IN CHICAGO**, 2000 (Blue Note)

The next release for Blue Note was recorded live at Chicago’s storied Green Mill Lounge, Elling’s home and long-time artistic base. Straight from the heart, and comprised largely of previously unrecorded material, the album featured Elling singing with jazz great Jon Hendricks and blowing with Chicago tenor greats Von Freeman, Ed Petersen, and Eddie Johnson. Here again Elling is heard pushing the boundaries of vocalese on his lyric tour de force for Wayne Shorter’s signature composition, “Night Dreamer.” “This CD reflects Elling’s utterly creative genius, tearing down conventional perceptions,” wrote the Jazz Educators Journal. “An on-location recording of Kurt Elling is absolutely the way to go to capture higher measures of his literal uniqueness as a nouveau phenomenal male jazz vocalist. A ‘live’ session truly unveils the spontaneous, sizzling charges and poetic imagination he develops in the venue, promptly pulling in the audience close-up with an intensity that is both tender and fierce.” The GRAMMY nomination for “Live in Chicago” was Elling’s fourth.

## **FLIRTING WITH TWILIGHT**, 2001 (Blue Note)

Elling’s fifth Blue Note recording, “Flirting With Twilight,” presented a collection of timeless songs set against spare, beautiful horn arrangements, and featured an all-star rhythm section of collaborator Laurence Hobgood on piano, bassist Marc Johnson (Bill Evans, Steps Ahead, Bill Frisell), and drummer Peter Erskine (Weather Report, John Abercrombie, Peter Erskine Trio). Reviewers were stunned. Down Beat exclaimed, “Nothing ... prepared me for Elling’s accomplishment on ‘Flirting With Twilight,’ a cohesive, highly personalized exploration of 12 demanding love songs ... which he addresses with the legato grace of a master ballroom dancer.” JazzTimes declared, “With ‘Flirting With Twilight’ ... Kurt Elling continues his triumphant reign as the thinking man’s vocalist.” “Flirting With Twilight” garnered two GRAMMY nominations, including one for Laurence Hobgood’s arranging.

## **MAN IN THE AIR**, 2003 (Blue Note)

For his sixth Blue Note record, “Man In The Air,” Elling wrote and performed lyrics for nine jazz compositions that might be considered classics of the genre. Jazz compositions and solos from writers as diverse as Pat Metheny, Herbie Hancock, John Coltrane, Bobby Watson, and Joe Zawinul all received the Elling treatment. Including an epic seven-minute vocalese of “Resolution,” the second movement on John Coltrane’s album, “A Love Supreme,” the album crowned Elling’s six-record run at Blue Note. Biographer Lara Perigrinelli wrote, “The success of these pieces tends to hinge on vocal control, sonic atmosphere, and use of space. Their lyrics follow suit. Elling wrestles with themes of love, life, loss, and the indefatigable human spirit in all of their complexities without allowing himself to indulge in clichés or platitudes.” The album featured intelligent, swinging performances from guest artist Stefon Harris and the ever-necessary collaboration of Laurence Hobgood.

In 2007, having fulfilled his original obligation to Blue Note of six recordings, Kurt Elling reviewed his strategic partnerships across the board and decided to join with the burgeoning Concord/Universal partnership.

**NIGHTMOVES**, 2007 (Concord)

“Nightmoves” represented a real page-turn for Kurt Elling. For his first outing on the Concord/Universal label, Elling created a noir-ish “cinema of the mind,” a sonic LP of life lived between dusk and dawn. With guests Howard Levy, Romero Lumbambo, Christian McBride and Bob Mintzer, the new disc featured Elling’s own writing alongside that of Duke Ellington, Betty Carter, and A.C. Jobim. The opening salvo in JazzTimes’ review of “Nightmoves” seemed to respond to Elling’s overall career: “If there is a royal bloodline of male jazz singers, I’d suggest it progresses from Satchmo to Mel Torme to Jon Hendricks to Mark Murphy to Kurt Elling. While there are plenty of clever jazz lads around with noble ambition...none show any sign of trumping (or even echoing) Elling’s kaleidoscopic amalgam of gifts.” CDReview, perhaps letting their enthusiasm run away with them, called “Nightmoves” simply “the best vocal release of the millennium.”

**- Other Accomplishments -**

In 2002, Elling produced a vocal summit entitled “Four Brothers” at Chicago’s Park West Theater, which featured Elling, Mark Murphy, Kevin Mahogany, and the legendary Jon Hendricks. A cross-generational tribute to the art of jazz singing, the “Four Brothers” on occasion featured Andy Bey, Giacomo Gates and Peter Eldrige in place of Kevin Mahogany. Elling led the group on successful tours of Europe and the U.S. in 2003 and 2004 to broad acclaim. A final blowout performance in the summer of 2005 took place in Chicago’s Millennium Park. That concert featured Sheila Jordan in the fourth spot and was called “Three Brotha’s and a Motha’.”

In 2004, Elling was invited to perform and record a groundbreaking work by pianist and composer Fred Hersch. A prolific composer, Hersch created a song cycle based on words from Walt Whitman’s LEAVES OF GRASS, performed by a ten-piece chamber jazz ensemble of voices, brass, woodwinds, strings, and rhythm section. Hersch’s masterful writing, together with the vocal performances of Elling and Kate McGarry, made this a transcendent record. JazzTimes wrote, “Both vocalists bring a pure tone and the kind of technique that makes everything seem effortless to Hersch’s twisting melodic lines, bringing out their lyrical beauty while ensuring that none of Whitman’s words are obscured.”

In 2006, as artist-in-residence at the 49th annual Monterey Jazz Festival, Elling teamed up with composer/bassist John Clayton to create “Red Man/Black Man.” Here Elling juxtaposed his own new writing with the works of Native American poets – most notably, Maurice Kenny – and the late Chicago poet and Pulitzer Prize-winner Gwendolyn Brooks in a musical setting that featured the Clayton/Hamilton Orchestra. Said allaboutjazz.com, “... the emotional depth of the piece, the power of Elling’s poetic selections and the strength of Clayton’s musical conception are undeniable. This outstanding composition hits home with substantial force.”

Elling has gone beyond jazz performance to write and direct more broadly based literary and artistic events, most notably in works commissioned by Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theater. In 1998 he undertook a critical, multi-dimensional exploration of the life and work of Beat poet Allen Ginsberg. In reviewing the show, The Chicago Tribune called it “audacious” and “provocative.” “... Elling’s [treatment] turned a fairly predictable survey of Beat Literature into a more balanced view of a key chapter in American history. Here was an evening of poetry and music informed by a sense of morality, as well as an aversion to politically correct points of view.” This show was remounted to further critical acclaim at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., the Annenberg Center in Philadelphia, and at the Galway Festival in Ireland.

Elling was commissioned one year later to create an event fusing jazz and modern dance, this time featuring his wife, professional dancer Jennifer Elling. Again Elling was praised as an innovator. The Chicago Sun-Times said, “Having risen as a Jazz singer on the wings of modern poetry, including his own, (Elling) is in full thrall of art’s interactive possibilities.” The Chicago Tribune agreed, proclaiming, “Because spoken word, subtle lighting design, fluid stage direction and a heady spirit of improvisation all play key roles, the evening touches on more aesthetic forms than one generally encounters in a week’s worth of concert going. So many of these vignettes prove eloquent – with the crisp imagery of Elling’s lyrics enhanced by the abstract, poetic motion of the dancers – that it’s difficult to single out highlights.”

Perhaps the highest profile commission to date has come from the City of Chicago, which invited Elling to write, direct, perform in and host a ninety-minute performance event for its millennial celebration. Two guests from every country in the world were invited to Chicago and were hosted by the city for a weeklong celebration, “The Whole World Comes Home To Chicago.” Elling’s production, “This Is Our Music, These Are Our People,” served as the showcase of the city’s artistic life. The show featured blues great Buddy Guy, Von Freeman, the late author and historian Studs Terkel, word jazz artist Ken Nordine, the late Illinois Poet Laureate Gwendolyn Brooks, members of the Joffrey Ballet, visual art from Ed Paschke and Tony Fitzpatrick and a ninety-voice gospel choir, The Reginald McCracken True Voices of Christ Concert Ensemble. The Chicago Tribune called the results “stirring ... magical ... Such seamless blends of talent resulted from long hours of planning.”

In February 2001, Elling created yet another new work for the Steppenwolf Theater. For this production, titled "LA/CHI/NY," he invited one poet and one musician from each of America's three great cities to bring the sounds of their environments to the stage in a new collaboration. Poets Kamau Daa'ood and Tracie Moore represented Los Angeles and New York, with Elling himself speaking for Chicago. The musical ensemble featured Elling's Blue Note label mate, New Yorker Charlie Hunter playing eight-string guitar, L.A.'s B-Sharp Quartet leader Herb Graham, Jr. playing drums, and Chicago's Mars Williams (NRG Ensemble, Liquid Soul) playing tenor saxophone. The Chicago Sun-Times wrote, "...LA/CHI/NY' was less about geographical connections than spiritual ones. But it radiated such good vibes, you can only hope that plans to take it east and west come to fruition." The Tribune went further, saying, "Someone, somewhere ought to give Elling the means to take stage work, or any of his others, and bring them to fruition through a longer engagement. With that opportunity, Elling might truly be able to change the way audiences think about jazz, poetry and life in America."

In addition to his work as an artist, Kurt Elling served as a national trustee for the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (The GRAMMYS) beginning in 1999. In May of 2003, he was elected Vice Chair of the 17,000-member service organization and served two successful terms. While Vice Chairman, Elling was effective in opening up new channels of communication within the Academy. He helped create and hosted the first two annual Recording Academy Salutes to Jazz. He oversaw the creation of the Academy's Lifetime Achievement and Trustees Awards Review Committee. For his work on behalf of the Academy, Elling was presented with two distinguished service medallions.

On the larger political scene, Kurt Elling ran for and won election at the congressional level to join the Illinois Delegation to the 2004 Democratic National Convention. Chief among his actions in the lead up to the 2008 election, Elling acted as master of ceremonies at a jazz oriented fundraiser at New York's 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y. Musicians like Roy Haynes, Brad Mehldau, Dianne Reeves, Jeff "Tain" Watts, Charlie Hunter, Doug Wamble and Roy Hargrove came together with Kurt to perform on behalf of an Obama victory and raised more than \$70,000 to send off to the DNC in time to help ensure a historic and welcome outcome.

If "Nightmoves", Elling's 2007 release for new label partners heralded a new era for the work of Kurt Elling, his forthcoming release, DEDICATED TO YOU: Kurt Elling Sings the Music of Coltrane and Hartman, takes the heralded past into the era's new future. Recorded live at Lincoln Center's American Songbook Series, the recording is a showcase for Elling at his most expansive and emotional. The concert is built on arrangements created by long-time collaborator Laurence Hobgood for voice, rhythm section and the string quartet known as ETHEL, and features master tenor saxophonist Ernie Watts.

*Look for the release of DEDICATED TO YOU on June 23, 2009.*