

# Melissa Manchester

## The Fellas

Let's hear it for the boys! More than 25 years after Melissa Manchester released *Tribute*, her 1989 album that honored the great female singers who influenced her, she turns the tables with *The Fellas*, a radiant encomium to the men, including Frank Sinatra, Mel Tormé, Tony Bennett and Dean Martin, and the iconic songs they made famous.

Singing with a verve and emotional vulnerability that immediately captivates, the Grammy winner inventively reimagines these beloved standards. She turns "Chances Are" into a sly bossa nova and scats with seemingly impossible ease on "Love Is Just Around The Corner," while bringing an understated urgency to "Night and Day."

Many of these tunes embedded themselves into Manchester's musical DNA while she was growing up on New York City's Upper West Side. "These were the artists and songs that were on the radio as my family ate dinner," she says. "I am deeply familiar with this world." Indeed, Manchester brings a nuanced understanding to the songs' delicate phrasing and lyrical construction that would baffle lesser singers.

Manchester's 21st album opens with a rambunctious, horn-filled version of "Ain't That A Kick In the Head" that swings exuberantly from the rafters. "I wanted to invite the audience in, right away, to what the album and song was going to feel like. When the whole band yells out 'Beautiful!', it's so indicative of a bygone era when you'd hear a band chime in."

“The band” is the 40-piece Blue Note Orchestra, a collection of students, alumni and faculty from Citrus College, the suburban Los Angeles university where Manchester is an honorary artist in residence.

*The Fellas* expands her relationship with The Blue Note Orchestra and her co-producer/Citrus College Dean of Visual and Performing Arts Robert Slack, which launched her 2015 album of originals, *You Gotta Love the Life*. “I’ve been waiting to create the coda to *Tribute* with the men, and this showed up as a magnificent gift when Bob Slack asked me if I had a project in my mind that could use their orchestra,” says Manchester of the crowd-funded album. “It’s been so thrilling. The students are trained to be not only pro musicians, but they are given real life lessons,” she continues. “They show up ready to be part of an adventure. Their eyes are so bright. It’s serious fun.”

Arrangers Peter Hume, Terry Wollman, Doug Walter and (Citrus alum) David Catalan created spellbinding orchestrations that pay homage to the originals, while crafting wholly new works of art. For example, Hume’s work on “Night and Day” spans Sinatra’s many different interpretations of the Cole Porter classic, from the quiet hush of an early rendition to a swinging 1957 take. “We cover decades in that one arrangement,” Manchester says.

Though Manchester only met a few of the men she pays homage to (both Mathis and Tormé recorded songs penned by Manchester), she didn’t need to know them personally to admire them. “I’ve loved these people from afar, which is the best way because all you are adoring is their art,” she says. “I just wanted to send them this love letter.”

Primarily a solo album, Manchester did recruit one very special fella to join her on *The Fellas*: Barry Manilow duets with Manchester on a jubilant “For Me and My Gal,” a tribute to Gene Kelly and Judy Garland, who performed the 1942 movie’s title track. “Silver screen musicals could have their own album by me,” Manchester says. “So much of my life always goes back to Judy Garland. She’s always with

me and with Barry.” Manilow and Manchester met 40 years ago when they were young jingle singers trying to break into show business. In fact, Manilow was responsible for introducing Manchester to Bette Midler, which led to Manchester’s stint as a founding member of Midler’s backing singers and dancers, the Harlettes.

Manchester brings her own experience and truth to each song and, though tackling the music of her heroes could be daunting, she was fearless. “A great song is a great song,” she says. “These fellas captured a moment in time. What I bring is not a literal homage to what they’ve done, it’s my female energy and appreciation of their male energy. It’s like when I sang, ‘Over the Rainbow.’ How are you going to fill Judy Garland’s shoes? You’re not. You pray for that space where you take your courage and bravery and walk in your own shoes.”

The song that resonates most with Manchester is “Smile,” written by Charlie Chaplin. She unerringly pays homage to Nat “King” Cole’s heartbreaking interpretation. “The longevity of the song is undeniable, the poignancy of the message is so touching,” she says. “As a performer, a woman, a human being, you’re so frequently on the stage and people don’t know what’s going on in your life, yet you smile and keep going.”

Like many of the men she salutes on *The Fellas*, Manchester’s career is remarkable not only for its longevity and accomplishments, but for its versatility. Following her time as a Harlette, Manchester’s tremendously successful solo career brought her critical and commercial acclaim. The “Midnight Blue” singer received her first Grammy nomination for Best Pop Female Vocal Performance in 1979 for the Peter Allen/Carole Bayer Sager-penned “Don’t Cry Out Loud,” winning the Grammy in that category four years later for “You Should Hear How She Talks About You.” Manchester has also had her songs recorded by Barbra Streisand, Roberta Flack, Dusty Springfield, Alison Krauss, Kenny Loggins and many others. Two songs she performed, “Through The Eyes Of Love” and “The Promise,” were nominated for Oscars in the same year. She has written tunes for several other films including *The*

*Great Mouse Detective, Lady and the Tramp II, Dirty Girl, and Tyler Perry's For Colored Girls.*

She has appeared on both the large (*For The Boys*) and small (*Blossom*) screen, as well as the stage, and she co-created (with lyricist Sharon Vaughn and playwright Rupert Holmes) the musical theatre sensation *Sweet Potato Queens*, which premiered at TUTS in Houston in 2016.

With *The Fellas*, Manchester completes a journey that began more than a quarter century ago, while also creating an exciting new chapter for her and her fans. And she's already thinking ahead to a possible second volume. "With all of these singers, for every song I chose, there were 20 more I could have chosen," she says. "There's so much music to mine. I'm happy to be my fans' guide."