

# Marcus Goldhaber *The Promise of You*

For over twenty years, Marcus Goldhaber has been a genial, easygoing font of good vibes on the New York jazz scene. Tall and dapper with his suit and pork pie hat and ready smile, Marcus is as warm as he is cool. He sings without frills. His vibrato-less tone recalls early Chet Baker; he also has the openhearted youthfulness of the young Sinatra. Marcus makes everything, including his spot-on intonation and time, sound easy.

This is his sixth album and his first in nearly a decade.

*The Promise of You* is about new beginnings, embraced optimistically. As always, Marcus lets his love of the Great American Songbook guide him, both as an inventive interpreter of familiar tunes and as a songwriter who never loses sight of the high bar that's been set for him.

All this harks back to his childhood in Buffalo. After dinner, Marcus's mother took to the piano and shared with him the songs of her youth, played in what he calls a "comforting style." He experienced "that sigh of relaxation you get when you hear a well-written song from the canon. It informed a lot of my approach." Today when he performs a standard he asks himself: "Are my ideas going to help tell the story? I could do a million things to this song. That doesn't mean I should."

In 2019 he co-founded and launched Room 623, known as Harlem's Speakeasy Jazz Club, a cozy nest that he hoped would help revitalize the legacy of live jazz in Harlem. With Marcus as its affable curator and compère, Room 623 (capacity 45) became a hotspot for what he calls "a multi-generational, diverse crowd who came in to both experience legendary artists and discover new talent and hang."

Running the club was all-consuming. Its closing, in 2024, broke his heart, yet it freed him to make this album: an outlet for "the beautiful energy that I had been immersed in, all those human connections." Marcus delved into the almost one hundred songs he had written since his last disc and began shaping them with his musicians, several of whom had been mainstays at Room 623. One of them, Art Hirahara, is a *New York Times*-acclaimed pianist and arranger whose work ranges from exotic world music to the swinging mini-big-band and saloon-style charts heard here.

"Skylark" is usually heard as a wistful reverie. Art and Marcus shifted it from 4/4 to a breezy 6/8 that conveys "the swing and sway of what the story is," says Marcus. "I see this person wandering, following the bird. I wanted the soaring soprano sax that Jay Rattman plays so beautifully to embody the skylark. 'Skylark' is a great kickoff for the album. It says, get ready, we're going places."

He and arranger Jon Davis swapped the bravura swagger of "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise" for the casual tone heard here; Marcus sings with the confidence of a man who can see his road unfurling before him. His version of "I'll See You in My Dreams" is living-room intimate. Marcus sings it with only Art and trumpeter Summer Camargo (born 2001), the youngest member of the Saturday Night Live band. "She plays with such an old soul," Marcus says.

His own compositions depict happy moments of togetherness. In the title song, a breezy jazz waltz, Marcus sings of the rewards of keeping the faith that love is around the corner. In "You Will Be Loved" he sings of the sweetness of anticipating that next meeting: "the warmth of her eyes, the touch of her hair, as you softly sway."

Marcus wrote the shuffling swing tune "Uptown Cabaret" before he ever ran one. He envisioned a man on a date in a joint that's too raucous to make a connection. "I got inside his head and let him tell a story about this beautiful, unique spot uptown that he hoped would help tip the scales in his favor and pave the way to fall in love." Jay Rattman's clarinet is the whimsical third wheel in "Two at a Time," which describes the joys of ambling through life hand-in-hand with someone special.

Marcus chose the musicians not only for their chops but for their upbeat energy: drummer Alvester Garnett ("You can't help but feel better after being around him"), guitarist Paul Bollenback ("He has a wealth of musical knowledge and styles and a lot of gritty sophistication") and bassist Michael O'Brien ("Not only is he incredibly prolific, he's one of the funniest men and best partners I've ever been onstage with - that energy lifted up the whole project").

O'Brien plays the foreboding bass line that frames the normally hard-swinging "The Best Is Yet to Come," the album's closer. Marcus's slowed-down version suggests a man who has journeyed through the shadows of life to reach the sun. Carolyn Leigh's "extremely intimate lyric," he says, is "about the moment when you've discovered that, while things have been pretty good, they're not even close to what's about to come."

—James Gavin

[James Gavin's books include biographies of Chet Baker, Peggy Lee, George Michael, and Anita O'Day.]