

To sing the Great American Songbook convincingly, it helps to believe in chance. All the legendary composers of standards – George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, Harold Arlen, the list goes on – had something to say about life’s serendipities. Their songs are full of unexpected encounters, fine romances that blossom out of nowhere. Their wistful and often impossibly beautiful melodies convey the magic of happenstance and also its flipside, the capricious cruelty of fate. Their lyrics celebrate the notion that life can change in an instant – when that vision of loveliness steps out of a dream and you suddenly find yourself bewitched, bothered and bewildered.

Boz Scaggs believes in this sort of thing. You can tell that from the opening stanzas of ‘Speak Low,’ the sublime and sexy follow-up to his critically acclaimed 2003 standards collection ‘But Beautiful.’ Recorded in four days with the musicians playing live together in the same room, *Speak Low* oozes the spontaneous essence of torch song. It’s romantic singing done casual and breezy – from the first notes, you sense that everyone involved is alive to the possibilities of the moment. At the same time, it’s a feast of carefully wrought moods – here’s Scaggs, owner of one of the most distinctive voices in popular music, singing sweet and low in the thick shadows. About the lover who, he discovered too late, was too good to be true.

Fittingly, ‘Speak Low’ is the result of a chance encounter.

The multi-dimensional singer, whose 1976 album ‘Silk Degrees’ was one of the landmark pop titles of the decade, began working on ‘Speak Low’ several years ago. He’d settled on most of the material, and had developed a rough notion of the sound in his head. “I had a few distinct elements I wanted to hear with my voice,” Scaggs recalls. “I knew I wanted reeds, bass flutes and clarinets. I wanted to try to sing with strings, but I didn’t want it to sound like generic strings.” He needed an accomplice, an arranger who could bring those textures to life; as part of his search, he flew from his home in the Bay Area to New York to meet with some prospective collaborators. At first he was discouraged – he remembers wondering whether he’d ever realize the sound he’d imagined. And then one night, as he and his son were walking through the Village, he experienced what he describes as a “remarkable coincidence.” “It was raining, cold out. We walked by the Blue Note and heard music coming out of the club. It was vibes, string trio, a couple of horns – this was the sound I’d been hearing in my head, exactly. Turned out to be the Gil Goldstein Septet. After the set we started talking, and it was just a really nice meeting. When we got together around a piano, that was it. We knew.”

In subsequent sessions, Scaggs and Goldstein concocted a sly, almost subliminal approach that emphasizes openness – this is torch singing as it was practiced during the crooner heyday of the 1950s, with each phrase guided by sensitivity and understatement. Some tunes showcase Scaggs fronting an agile rhythm section, while others, including the title track and a sultry “Invitation,” are fleshed out ever so gently, with clarinets burbling in the basement and delicate splashes of color from the strings.

Scaggs says he knew, from the beginning, that those fleeting textures were essential to the enterprise: “So many people in the last decade have gone back to the standards, the list is as long as my arm. Lots of them with big orchestras, too. It seemed pointless to even go there unless we were going to do something to make these songs our own.... We had to find an emotional connection. It’s a testament to the songs themselves that they keep getting redone, but that makes it tricky, too. We played around a lot with different tempos and feels, pushed the songs in different directions.”

That sense of invention – coy, often oblique invention rather than radical reconstruction – defines ‘Speak Low.’ One example is Duke Ellington’s “Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me,” which is most often rendered in a bouncy medium-tempo swing pulse. After trying it that way, Scaggs and his crew slowed the tempo down dramatically, to a captivating crawl. The possibilities, Scaggs says, suddenly multiplied. “When we tried it like that, we were surprised at how the slow ballad tempo gave the lyrics more emotional dimension. It’s hard to sing that way – I call it ‘jumping from post to post,’ because there’s a lot of area between the beats. But it really works.”

And though Scaggs took care to avoid copying or emulating the classic interpretations of these songs, in a few cases he found it nearly impossible. His “I Wish I Knew” draws on the memorable rendition on John Coltrane’s Ballads album: “That’s where I learned the tempo, and the phrasing. He legitimized that song for me.” And then there’s “She Was Too Good To Me,” which was recorded by jazz vocalist and trumpeter Chet Baker. “It’s very hard to escape Chet on that,” Scaggs acknowledges. “It will be said that I leaned on Chet, and I openly admit it. When he goes into that pure, unwavering place, that’s some of the most beautiful singing on the planet.”

Scaggs has studied Baker and many other jazz figures, but makes clear that he doesn’t consider himself a jazz singer: “That’s sacred ground,” he says flatly, leaving no room for discussion. “Me, I stick close to the melodies...I am enthralled with the melodies. I don’t go out and jump off the cliff, I try to find my place inside the tunes, by adding little rhythmic elements.” He looks forward to performing this material live on a regular basis – he’ll embark on a national tour of legendary jazz clubs in fall 2008– in hopes that the experience will help bring him a bit closer to jazz. “What you have to remember about the great singers, the Sarah Vaughan’s and Billie Holiday’s, is that they came up doing this, creating these moments, every night. Imagine the number of sets and the late nights they must have worked, five nights a week. All that became part of their music.”

Scaggs wasn’t on the scene for the hot-and-heavy jazz years, but the singer and musician has been associated with some of the most incendiary talents of the rock era. Scaggs began his solo recording career in 1969, with an eponymous album for Atlantic Records that features members of the famed Muscle Shoals rhythm section. That album has achieved a kind of legendary cult status for the extended blues foray “Loan Me A Dime,” which features an incendiary guitar solo by the late Duane Allman.

In 1970, Scaggs began a long-term association with Columbia Records. His first three efforts for the label – ‘Moments,’ ‘Boz Scaggs and Band’ and ‘My Time’ – are loaded

with durable, insightful original songs. 'Slow Dancer,' issued in 1974, emphasizes understated textures and sleek, uptown grooves – a sound Scaggs would develop further on his commercial breakthrough 'Silk Degrees.' That album spawned several hit singles ("Lowdown," "Lido Shuffle," "Georgia," "We're All Alone" and "It's Over"), reached number 2 on the Billboard album chart, and eventually sold over 4 million copies. It also brought Scaggs a Grammy award: "Lowdown," which he co-wrote with David Paich, was voted Best R&B song.

For 'Silk Degrees' Scaggs relied on a small group of Los Angeles session musicians including keyboardist Paich and drummer Jeff Porcaro. Shortly after that recording those musicians formed the enormously successful '70s rock band Toto. Scaggs went on to release 'Middle Man' in 1980; it became his third consecutive platinum-selling title. Later that year, the singer essentially withdrew from the music business, with very little fanfare.

He couldn't stay away forever. Scaggs resurfaced in 1988 with 'Other Roads,' which contains the top 40 hit "Heart of Mine." In 1991, Scaggs joined Donald Fagan as part of his New York Rock & Soul Revue. After signing a new contract with Virgin Records and releasing several significant albums including 'Some Change' (1994) and the blues collection 'Come On Home' (1997), Scaggs joined up with David Paich and Danny Kortchmar on Scaggs' own favorite, 'Dig' (2001), and followed that with his first foray into jazz standards, 'But Beautiful,' in 2003, which rose to the number one spot on Billboard's jazz chart.

Scaggs credits the musicians on 'Speak Low' – Goldstein, percussionist Alex Acuna, bassist Scott Colley, vibraphonist Mike Mainieri and saxophonist Bob Sheppard plus a small studio orchestra – with helping him realize the sound he heard in his head. "I'm so incredibly lucky to work with players of this caliber," Scaggs says. "On really every tune, we'd try different things, and they always landed in a really interesting pocket."

The singer adds that the airy, inviting feeling of the new album is partly due to the atmosphere of the studio. The album was recorded at Skywalker Sound, a state-of-the-art studio that's part of filmmaker George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch complex. The room is massive, a soundstage big enough to fit an orchestra. Yet 'Speak Low' sounds like it was made in someone's cozy living room. "The sense of intimacy you can get there is quite remarkable," Scaggs says. "You sorta naturally think that you can get closer to the music in a smaller room, but that's not always true. At Skywalker, the vastness brought us all together.....When you enter you go through these huge heavy doors, and the enormous space and enormous quiet really gives you a sense of intimacy. The quiet in that room are much quieter, and all of the dynamics are really vivid. It's a great room to sing in."

Listening to the aptly titled 'Speak Low,' it's obvious that Scaggs and his accompanists enjoyed the superquiet quiet, the vivid contrasts. They seem to sense that these are ideal conditions for making subtle music. You can tell they're listening intently,

savoring the little ripples, ready to take all kinds of chances and at the same time moving gingerly, so as not to break the spell.