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UPTOWN RAPTURE: DEBBIE HARRY AT THE CARLYLE

BY SARAH LARSON



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The idea of most pop artists performing at the Café Carlyle—the intimate, elegant cabaret space at the Carlyle Hotel—wouldn't make intuitive sense, but the idea of Debbie Harry singing there does, with exclamation points. She's had chops, confidence, *je ne sais quoi*, and *va va voom* since the mid-seventies, when Blondie showed up on the Lower East Side and wowed everyone; Harry can handle a room full of dinner jackets and champagne flutes. The songs from Blondie's heyday still retain their pop-punk cool: "Heart of Glass," "Call Me," "The Tide Is High," "Atomic," "Sunday Girl," "Hanging on the Telephone," and "Rapture," among others. Last year, Blondie released a double album, "Blondie 4(0) Ever" and "Ghosts of Download," pairing rerecordings of hits with fun, synth-heavy new material (and a cover of Frankie Goes to Hollywood's "Relax"). Harry had said that the Carlyle show wouldn't be a Blondie show—she'd be focussing on her solo work, and some covers, in a style suited for the Carlyle and for her.

I had hoped and assumed this meant she wouldn't be plundering the American Songbook, though she'd be welcome to it; she's the rare older pop artist who doesn't need to

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legitimize herself with acknowledged classics. But, though I didn't expect a greatest-hits night, I held out hope for "Heart of Glass" and "Rapture," which she's praised in recent months. "Heart of Glass" is forever dreamy, forever wonderful, and would be more so at the Carlyle. And "Rapture"? Come on. I wanted to hear Harry say "Fab Five Freddy told me everybody's fly" while leaning on a baby grand.

The opening, last night, of her two-week engagement turned out to be magical, but not Fab Five Freddy magical. Harry is now sixty-nine, and the fans present were all ages: a haggard old sea-captain type, some impressively frosty rock-and-roll longhairs, a spiffed-out guy in biker boots and a dinner jacket with studded lapels. A lean New Wave gentleman with a grown-out sophisto-mullet sat at the piano, and then a door opened in the back, toward the bar. There, Debbie Harry—classic, ultimate Debbie Harry, in sunglasses and a cropped black leather jacket, her hair platinum blond and styled like a film-noir bombshell—appeared in a lighted doorway. She made her way to the front, climbed onstage, kept the sunglasses on. Her face was gorgeous and impassive, like Barbara Stanwyck's in the "Double Indemnity" grocery-store shot.

"Well, good evening," she said, from behind her shades. "Nice to see you all. Earlier, I was sort of going to myself, Why? Why?" People laughed. "The whole point of doing this was this ego boost of doing material I never get to do with Blondie." She introduced her "cohort, Matt Katz-Bohen," of Blondie, and the first song, "Strike Me Pink." "This first song is from my solo album 'Debravation,' the result of a collaboration with Anne Dudley from Art of Noise," she said. She sang about people who "point and say I look real / We all take turns on the Wonder Wheel." Katz-Bohen, in his black jacket and red shirt, hammered away at the piano.

"This next song, oddly enough, was written by Chuck Lorre, the producer of television," she said. "Two and a Half Men," the fight with Charlie Sheen, Lorre's ending the series by resurrecting Sheen's character and dropping a piano on his head—that Chuck Lorre. Apparently that's not all he can do with a piano. "This may be the only song that he has written," Harry said. "A long time ago, we did a song by Chuck Barris, who also went into TV: 'Palisades Park.' Am I talking too much?" "No!" everyone yelled, in love.

"This one is called 'French Kissing.' "

What to do with the information that one of Debbie Harry's biggest solo hits was written by the man we know best from the "I'm winning/tiger blood" era of pop culture? It was impressive. Harry sang in French and English; an audience member, a man, sang along in the corner. "Lips are in motion. Paris is calling," Harry sang. Her voice strained a bit at times, but who cares? She was in command and unruffled. She danced a bit, pointed toward Katz-Bohen during a piano solo. The Carlyle's baby grand had some electronic

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gadgets and a laptop on it. Harry smiled at us over her sunglasses and waved her hands a little.

“Thank you. We’re doing another song about kissing,” she said. “I think most of these songs are pretty romantic.” The sunglasses came off. “This is an imitation of a kiss,” she sang. “An imitation is all it is.” Her eyes! Her eyes were as stunning as the sunglasses were dramatic. Arched eyebrows, smoky eye shadow. Katz-Bohen played a smooth, saxophony synth sound. The man in the back of the room kept singing along, in a reverie. Harry could do a whole jazz show, easy, and you’d dig it. As the song faded out, she levelled some audience members with a look. That was a fun thing to do, for her and us—just look at people. Her eyes were deadly wonderful.

“That’s a very beautiful song,” she said. “I love it. Matt hates it.”

“I love it,” Katz-Bohen said, standing up, with a guitar.

“He said, *jazz*? This is from my album ‘Def Dumb & Blonde.’ The words and music are by Chris Stein,” her longtime partner in Blondie. “It had a talking part with Ian Astbury. What band was he in?”

“The Cult!” a few people called out.

“It’s called ‘Lovelight.’” Katz-Bohen played a threatening drone sound on his guitar and Harry sang about a wall of fire and a sea of blood. One bit had a pleasing soupçon of the “I’ll see who’s around” part of “One Way or Another,” a song I remember fondly from her appearance on “The Muppets,” somewhere in my amphibian brain. She did some slinky dancing, squinting, rolling her hips.

“We’ve been rehearsing a lot, and I’m a little bit rough around the edges,” she said, taking a sip from a black mug.

“We love you!” a woman yelled.

“Thank you!” Harry said. She toasted her with the mug, then sang a song called “Love with a Vengeance.” At a front table, a young man in black-framed glasses looked up at her admiringly, singing along: “I love you with a vengeance.” Katz-Bohen played a guitar riff that sounded like a car crash crossed with a blues lick. Later he played a sound that sounded like diving into a pool, and Harry make a diving motion, looking like a hood ornament on a car with a real sense of itself.

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She sang a song called “Lucky Jim”; a New York trilogy ending with a Moby song and images of diamonds in her hair and “money, drugs, and old New York”; a song by Katz-Bohen, “Love Doesn’t Frighten Me at All”; and a sultry stunner called “Wednesday Afternoon.” “What the hell? I don’t care. Let them know about the way you come around here,” she sang. During a song with a driving synth beat called “Kiss and Don’t Tell”—“another song about kissing”—she sounded both modern and classic. “It’s probably best we keep this on the D.L.,” she sang. During an interlude, she whispered “K-I-S-S, K-I-S-S,” and made deadpan kissy noises, both above the fray and in the fray. Katz-Bohen made a series of R2-D2 bleeps with his laptop. “You can do it with me, I’ll never tell, I’ll keep a secret,” Harry sang.

This was always one of the great appeals of Blondie—Harry’s usual narrative stance is that of a woman who has all kinds of romantic to-ings and fro-ings and who casually accepts her own power. Onstage, she swivelled her hips and made the kissy noise again, amusing herself and everybody else. In a week, I thought, she’ll really own this room. In the front row, the man in glasses appeared to be dying from joy. “Kiss kiss,” she sang.

“I love Tuesday night,” she said. “Sticks in my mind because I used to have such fun on Fourteenth Street on Tuesday nights. A little club called Jackie 60. This is a Tuesday-night crowd!” She sang “In Love With Love,” a fun, synthy New Wave song and another Chris Stein collaboration, with a bit of a Nico vibe.

“I don’t know. Have we fulfilled our obligation?” she asked, to the air. This reminded me for a moment of Molly Ringwald, on her first night at the Carlyle, a bit unsure about what to do at the end. Harry said to an audience member, who yelled out something about an encore, “Nope: it’s all-inclusive.” She introduced the final number.

“I had no interest in being involved with a frog,” she said. Oh man—she was talking about “The Muppet Show.” This was exciting. “Then I saw Dizzy Gillespie on it. So I sang with Kermit.” Katz-Bohen played the first few notes of “The Rainbow Connection” on his electric guitar. I cried, as I always do when I hear those notes. There would be no Blondie—no “Rapture,” no “Heart of Glass,” no “Atomic”—but for members of the Statler and Waldorf generation, this was rapture enough. “Why are there so many songs about rainbows?” Harry sang. “And what’s on the other side?” Katz-Bohen, beside her, could have been Dr. Teeth. Harry sang a tender, respectful “Rainbow Connection”—“What’s so amazing that keeps us stargazing?”—and as she sang, a fan in the crowd waved at her. She waved back. Then more fans waved, a sea of hands in the air, and she waved to them, too. “Someday, we’ll find it, the rainbow connection,” she sang. “The lovers, the dreamers, and me.”