

A NATURAL WOMAN: REVIEW

By Peter Mechen for Middle C: 22 Jan 2022

Ali Harper's Circa Theatre tribute to the extraordinary Carole King

If you're like me, you'll still have a headful of songs playing away in your cerebral jukebox which instantly bring back nostalgic memories of different eras, but in many cases have neglected the "fine detail" of actually knowing who WROTE some of these songs.....well, if that's so, then singer Ali Harper's latest presentation "A Natural Woman" at Circa Theatre (which opened on Saturday night) is a "must see" for you!

The music and its presentation here felt for me like a series of oceanic currents which caught me up and swept me along through music's wider vistas, leaving me at the end somewhat dumbfounded at both the force and unexpected variety of songwriter Carole King's creative genius. Of course I knew her name (automatically bracketing her with Jerry Goffin, her husband and writer of her song's lyrics for almost twenty years of her career, up to 1968), and was certainly aware of her most famous recording, the album "Tapestry", which appeared in 1971 (but which I never bought or got to know, to my great regret, being too enamoured of her friend Joni Mitchell's music at the time). But what I didn't grasp was the extent to which King wrote songs that other people made famous – or made other people famous!

I could go through Ali Harper's show and pinpoint the epiphanous (both retrospective and "then-and-now") moments, but thought I would leave such delights of belated recognition for those, like myself, who relish such things *in situ* apart from the ones I simply HAVE to mention! Of course, to Carole King's fans, aware of her far-reaching and resonating influence, each song Harper presented here was a gem, to be re-exhibited and relished all over again, including several I didn't really know, and therefore couldn't, in perhaps the show's most touching moment, respond to the singer's ready invitation to "join in" with the lyrics of "You've got a friend", which was also a hit for King's colleague James Taylor in 1971. Now, had I bought that "Tapestry" LP back in the 1970s (along with those Joni Mitchell albums!) I would have been able to sing along with the rest!

Harper opened her show in atmospheric style, with a sultry rendition of the opening words of one of King's most iconic songs "I feel the earth move" (the song that opened her "Tapestry" LP), then gradually and excitingly building up the music's trajectories with the help of her accompanying musicians into that captivating state of physicality that's part of her work's whole-heartedness. Harper's generous acknowledgements of the contributions made by pianist Francis Mena, guitarist Nick Granville and bassist Scott Maynard throughout the evening drew attention to the occasion's celebration of musicianship per se in a way one couldn't help feeling King herself would have very much endorsed and enjoyed.

This show largely followed the format and style of a previous Ali Harper "special" featuring the life and work of songwriter Burt Bacharach, though a significant difference was that the musical accompaniments here were generated "live", with, midway through the show's first half, another singer added to the vocal mix, the sweet-voiced Francis Leota, duetting with Harper in some of the numbers, and adding to the vocal support provided by the band throughout. As with Bacharach, Harper could use her subject's songwriting output as material illustrating the latter's lifestory; though King's activities (however belated) as a performer of her own songs enlarged in scope the means by which her "presence" was evoked.

Ali herself took over the piano for the accompaniment of one of King's songs, "Lay Down My Life", remarking wryly at the number's end that it was the first occasion on which she had accompanied a song on the piano on a stage, and that she had a further 25 shows to get her fingers properly into shape before the season's end!

Apart from the pleasures of composer-discovery in the case of a number of well-known songs, I was as intrigued by hearing a number of King's compositions I didn't know at all and really liked – I've already mentioned the heartfelt strains of "You've got a Friend" – and responded with, firstly, as much relish to the Joni-Mitchell-like "At this time in my life" as to the later and more confident "Natural Woman", and then to the deeply-touching "Child of Mine", a beautiful meditation on the significance of parenthood – all performed by Harper (the latter a vocal collaboration with Francis Leota) with a certain frisson resonating further as Harper spoke of her own admiration for King and her singular qualities of courage and determination in the face of life's difficulties.

The show's title "A Natural Woman" summed up this sympathetic and squarely-faced portrayal of King throughout her various career, taking in her stride significant personal highlights and setbacks, and bringing out the heartfelt, almost confessional nature of her songwriting, and subsequently her performances. The breakup of her first marriage to Jerry Goffin was a turning-point for King, leading her reluctantly to focus on building a parallel career as a performer, to which end the release of "Tapestry" in 1971 succeeded beyond her wildest dreams, topping the US sales charts for a record-breaking fifteen weeks. In it she repossessed some of her own songs such as "It's Too Late" and "Will you love me Tomorrow". And, three subsequent marriages produced altogether four children for King, here giving the song "Child of Mine" an extra fillip of emotion in its significance.

Harper's was, for me, more of a retrospective tribute to Carole King than a re-evocation of her as an on-stage personality – I was a little surprised at this, considering the effect of her incredibly moving recreation of another icon, Doris Day, in an earlier show, in which we seemed to be taken right into Day's world with Harper herself on that occasion seemingly infused with her subject's charismatic persona. Here, conversely, she seemed to take pains to emphasise parallel worlds of then and now, telling us, for example, that King's record-breaking release "Tapestry" appeared the year that she, Harper, was born. True, the dresses Harper wore (a different one for each half) seemed to me most apposite, straight from the '70s, and whose effect augmented those moments when in direct vocal flight the singer seemed suitably (and satisfyingly) possessed with her subject's singular focus, one triumphantly embodied by the title given to the evening's presentation.

Sadly, the advent of the Omicron virus would seem to already indicate a marked effect upon A Natural Woman's season, with future shows (at time of writing) continuing to require vaccine passes and face masks, but also limiting audience numbers per performance, due to social distancing. The performances are scheduled to run until February 22nd, so people who intend to go (or have already booked) should contact Circa for updates and clarification without delay.

To Ali Harper and her colleagues, on- and off-stage, all the best for the show's continuance under these trying circumstances! To my mind, both the material and the performances fully deserve whatever interest and attention is still possible!

A Natural Woman: on at CIRCA 22 Jan– 19 Feb 2022

A NATURAL WOMAN: REVIEW

By Sharron Pardoe for Dom Post: 22 Jan 2022

Ali Harper brings classic Carole King album to stage in soaring performance

It took just a few moments for me to be transported back to my teenage life, one that was set to the backdrop of Carole King's *Tapestry* album. From the opening bars of *I Feel the Earth Move* I was back in the small town I grew up in and, as the show progressed, I relived the anxiety and thrill of new relationships, breakups and heartache through the eyes of an impressionable teenager.

Ali Harper brought to life all those memories with her polished performance of King's songs from that amazing 1971 album. It was King's second album and truly a masterpiece, scooping up awards, staying in the top 10 for an astonishing 15 weeks and showing her confident progression as a songwriter and performer. Fifty-one years later it hasn't lost its lustre.

A Natural Woman doesn't just showcase the songs from *Tapestry*. Devised by Harper, King's earlier songs which she wrote for many performers with her first husband Gerry Goffin are also used to help convey King's story – her life as a young songwriter, mother, home-maker and environmentalist. And although familiar, the music arrangements by Tom Rainey kept them fresh. Harper is a great storyteller and in between hit after hit, from *It's too Late* to *Will You love Me Tomorrow*, she regaled the audience with snippets from King's life, involving us with humour and insight.

The staging was simple – a stripped back set with Harper wearing flowing 70s-style dresses and just the musicians adding extra colour to the performance. At one stage my companion whispered to me that we were seeing a masterpiece in musicianship and I had to agree. Not only was Harper compelling and soaring with her vocal performance, but the musicians were also bringing everything they had. This was even more remarkable without a drummer on stage to drive the band. Pianist Francis Meria, bass player Scott Maynard and guitarist Nick Granville all brought the percussion alive and also doubled up as backing singers for Harper. Meria looked the most comfortable in this role with his crooner voice adding depth to a Donny Osborne rendition of another King song, *Go Away Little Girl*.

Granville is well-known among Wellington audiences and every time he broke out in a lead solo, the audience responded with applause. The sound was mostly perfect – occasionally the guitar was too prominent in the general mix. Backing Harper was Francis (Frankie) Leota whose rendition of *Child of Mine* was raw, and heartfelt, giving me goosebumps. Her mellow tone was perfect for the harmonies used to accompany Harper.

During the final numbers of the evening, *Natural Woman* and *You've Got a Friend*, the audience were singing along and there was a very happy hum at the end of the evening as the theatre cleared.

As Harper says, "if we have learnt anything of late it's that life is for living, and living well, while we can and are able to". With that in mind, treat yourself to a fabulous night out of music and songs – and one you'll likely know all the words to!

A Natural Woman: on at CIRCA 22 Jan– 19 Feb 2022

A NATURAL WOMAN: REVIEW

By Ralph McAllister for Kapiti and Coast Independent: 22 Jan 2022

A 'Natural Woman' and 'Prodigiously Talented'

Sometimes growing old has its advantages, says Ralph McAllister...

I have been able to follow Ali Harper's astonishing career from her student days until now.

Her exciting artistic development continues to amaze. This weekend Circa was packed for her new show A NATURAL WOMAN. The hugely enthusiastic audience paid tribute to this prodigiously talented woman, and many would have left the theatre to urge their friends to make sure they booked for the 100 limited spaces available over the next three weeks.

Prediction?

This will be the hottest ticket in town.

And the show?

Possibly her best ever.

What !

Better than DORIS DAY?

Better than LEGENDARY DIVAS?

BACHARACH?

Ali and her supporting team reach a new high

What lifts this particular show a notch higher ,perhaps, is the supporting team of bass Scott Maynard,Francis Meria,pianist,Frances Le'ota,singer, and Nick Granville,guitar.

They bring an extra musical variety to the songs, moving felicitously from Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow through to A Natural Woman ,using a host of other well-known and not so well-known standards on the journey.

The details of King's various husbands and life are sketchy and brief which bothered me not one iota.

The songs reigned supreme.

Ali's generosity of spirit meant leaving her ego outside ,from time to time ,and the result was a combination of talents which was deeply moving.

There's magic in the air at Circa these next few weeks.

Make sure you capture some of it.

A Natural Woman: on at CIRCA 22 Jan– 19 Feb 2022

A NATURAL WOMAN: REVIEW

By Madelaine Empson for Wellington Regional News: 22 Jan 2022

It's clear there are many Carole King fans in the house at *A Natural Woman*. While I'd happily belt out hits like *I Feel the Earth Move*, *Will You Love Me Tomorrow*, and the titular *A Natural Woman* (cue a rousing chorus of "you make me feeeel!") on karaoke night, I know very little about the master musician behind them. I am however a big fan of Ali Harper, which is more than enough to get me through the door.

Supported by her talented band of Nick Granville on guitar, Scott Maynard on bass, and Francis Meria on piano, Harper performs a range of King's most popular and lesser-known songs with soaring vocals and dazzling star power. Between the songs the audience is treated to brief spoken interludes that give us a behind-the-scenes glimpse into King's life and music. These moments shine the brightest when Harper speaks of her personal connection with the American singer-songwriter and often lead beautifully into the next song.

The main sensation I feel during *A Natural Woman* is surprise. Wait, Carole King wrote that? And that? *And* that? This is a particularly special feeling when Harper starts singing *Where You Lead*, the theme from *Gilmore Girls...* which my friend and I were talking about just before the show!

Around the halfway point, guest singer Francis Leota walks onstage and wows with vocals that blend beautifully with Harper's. Two voices matched in heaven. Performing a stirring solo of *Child of Mine*, not to mention ably supporting on the congas, Leota is a wonderful addition to the band of consummate musicians.

When Granville and Maynard are recruited to sing backup, they do so well but look out of their comfort zones. I hope their nerves dwindle over the course of the season, because they have every reason to feel confident in their vocal abilities.

In *A Natural Woman*, Ali Harper honours Carole King with an uplifting and astounding performance.

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A NATURAL WOMAN: REVIEW

By Howard Davis for Scoop Independent News: 22 Jan 2022

Ali Harper Covers The Songs of Carole King

Following hard on the heels of her previous hit show *The Look Of Love*, which focussed on the songs of Burt Bacharach and Hal David, Christchurch chanteuse Ali Harper has embarked on another nostalgic musical ride, this time covering the songs of Carole King, who churned out dozens of Top Twenty songs with her writing partner and first husband Gerry Goffin, including *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow* and (*You make me feel like*) *A Natural Woman*.

College sweethearts who married in 1959 when he was twenty and she was seventeen, they went on to write such hits as *Take Good Care of My Baby*, *The Locomotion*, *Go Away Little Girl*, *One Fine Day* for the Chiffons and *Pleasant Valley Sunday* for The Monkees. They were one of the most prolific and successful songwriting teams in the Brill Building, producing hit after hit for artists like The Drifters, The Shirelles, Little Eva, Herman's Hermits, Aretha Franklin, James Taylor, and Celine Dion, among many others.

John Lennon was quoted in 1963 as saying he wanted Paul McCartney and himself to become "the Goffin-King of England," but they divorced in 1969. In a Vanity Fair interview Goffin said that he "wanted to be a hippie - grew my hair long - and Carole did it modestly ... Then I started taking LSD and mescaline and Carole and I began to grow apart because she felt that she had to say things herself. She had to be her own lyricist." According to King's memoir, Goffin suffered from mental illness following ingestion of LSD, eventually undergoing treatment with lithium and electroshock therapy, and was diagnosed with manic depression.

As the center of the record industry shifted from New York to Los Angeles during the 1960s, King moved to California. She hung out in Laurel Canyon with James Taylor and Joni Mitchell and produced her first solo album *Writer* in 1970 for Lou Adler's Ode label. Taylor played acoustic guitar and provided backing vocals, but it peaked at 84 in the Billboard Top 200. The following year King released *Tapestry* which held the Top Album spot on the charts for fifteen consecutive weeks, won four Grammys, and appeared on Rolling Stone's 500 Greatest Albums of All Time at number 36.

A graduate of Toi Whakaari: The New Zealand Drama School, Harper has starred in numerous musicals and plays throughout New Zealand, including such staples as *Blood Brothers*, *Mamma Mia*, *Legally Blonde*, *My Fair Lady*, *Mary Poppins*, *The Sound of Music*, *Guys and Dolls*, *South Pacific*, *A Shortcut to Happiness*, *Side by Side* by Sondheim, *Calendar Girls*, *Jerry's Girls*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Tell Me on a Sunday*.

Tours across Aotearoa also include roles in the stage musicals *Chess*, *Evita*, *Pirates of Penzance*, *Oklahoma* and the one-woman play *Bombshells*, for which Harper was awarded 'Best Actress' in New York in 2014 and 'Chapman Tripp Best Actress' in Wellington in 2008. She has performed her cabaret show *A Down Under Diva* at Don't Tell Mama in New York, as well as the Metropolitan Room in 2013 and 2014, while the Court Theatre production of her show *Songs for Nobodies* won 'Best One Woman Show' at New York's United Solo Festival in 2018.

Pre-Covid, Harper was a regular fixture as guest entertainer on cruise ships and following the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019 she wrote the single *Release Our Love*, with proceeds going to the Victim Supports GiveaLittle page. Her six albums are *The Look of Love*, *A Doris Day Special*, *Legendary Divas*, *Naughty and Nice*, *Songs for Everybody* and *Something So Right*. Harper is also a Hansa qualified yoga teacher who teaches both privately and leads yoga-focused wellness retreats.

With standout tracks like *I Feel The Earth Move*, *It's Too Late*, *So Far Away*, and *You've Got A Friend*, *Tapestry* still stands the test of time. Ably accompanied by her understated, but more than capable backing band (Nick Granville on guitar, Francis Meria on piano, and Scott Maynard on bass), Harper's show really comes alive when she is joined by guest vocalist Frankie Leota, who provides some welcome harmonies and even gets to perform her own King song, accompanied by Harper on piano.

But it is Harper's warm and intimate delivery, interspersed with a few fascinating biographical details, that sends wistfully evocative tingles up and down the spine.

Her latest show runs until 19/2 at Circa Theatre in Wellington and at Christchurch's Piano Center for Music and The Arts from 25-27/2. Audience numbers are limited, so book your tickets now. They're selling fast ...

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A NATURAL WOMAN: REVIEW

By Simon Sweetman for Off The Tracks: 22 Jan 2022

Ali Harper has form with these shows. She takes a musician – be it singer (Doris Day) or writer (Burt Bacharach) and explores their best known material in a very user-friendly way; breaking it down for near-enough to first timers and never so patronising as to alienate the more knowledgeable fans. This is no mean feat. She imbues the performances with just enough biographical detail to make for an enjoyable thread.

Here she pays tribute to Carole King – so celebrating both singer and writer. King, famously, was a songwriter for hire first up. A hit machine with her husband Gerry Goffin. They pumped out songs in the 60s and then in 1971 King released *Tapestry* – a commercial and critical favourite. It features her versions of some of the songs she'd written in the 60s (Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow). It also features some songs that are best known for King's vocals and playing (I Feel The Earth Move, So Far Away, It's Too Late).

Harper's charm and energy is enough to carry any of the shows she has produced and performed. She wins you over. She also, smartly, picks the right subjects. And Carole King's music – spanning several generations – is always ripe for reappraisal, for celebration.

All of this could only work with the right kind of sympathetic band. And Nick Granville (guitar), Francis Meria (piano), Scott Maynard (bass) and Frankie Leota (vocals, percussion) are so perfectly capable of helping Harper to realise her goal here.

The energy sustains across both halves of the show. The hits continue to tumble. King's story is interesting and the warmth and heart of her character comes out in the stories and performances that Harper offers.

The challenge now, with Covid restrictions, is for this season to continue with the smaller audiences that the numbers-cap dictates. Good on cast and crew for sticking with this brilliant show through trying times.

Get along if you can. It'll warm your heart.

<https://linktr.ee/Simonsweetman>

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A NATURAL WOMAN: REVIEW

By Dave Smith for Theatreview: 22 Jan 2022

Quotes from the review:-

TOWERING PERFORMANCES ACROSS ALL THE NUMBERS

The ensemble comprises Nick Granville (guitar) Francis Meria (piano) with Scott Maynard (slap bass). All are top notch instrumentalists and contributed mightily. However, I must needs single out Mr Meria. Carole was, for all time, a devoted piano woman. The instrument is ubiquitous and is the pounding engine room of all her songs. Ali plays a bit but is not (yet) Carole King standard while Francis Meria plays a lot and is. Music simply pours out of him and his confident playing greatly enhances the dynamism and feel of this show.

Personal highlight number two is guest vocalist Frankie Leota. Ali competently sets up the songs to midway in the first half but from the moment Frankie hits the stage the entire show whizzes onto afterburner. It's not that Frankie (also doing some neatly judged bongo work) takes over in any way. Rather, two voices/ two hearts and a tight band blend into music heaven. The audience from then on just laps it up – and rightly so.

Ali is, one must say, extra good at getting the punters to sing along. She cannily uses, for example, a song from the distant past: 'Chains'. This is another early-days King offering that is deceptively simple to ingest. For singalong purpose it is but its lyrical concept, hammering the unlovely title to proclaim that human love can also be suffocating, was hugely innovative in its day. The Beatles used it on their first LP when they were introducing British ears weaned on the slack-jawed likes of Adam Faith to somewhat neglected but more meaningful American tunes.

Joint renditions of '(You make me feel like) A Natural Woman', 'You've got a Friend', 'Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?' 'Smackwater Jack' and 'It's too Late' are warm, rounded, fulfilling and the sort of stuff they pay \$150 a head to listen to across town. They reflect the impressive maturing of Carole's work in the '70s that delivered the dazzling album *Tapestry*.

Carole was never shallow but the depth of that landmark album stunned the world. (It is listed by Sean Egan in *100 Albums that changed the world*. He pithily notes that "...it showed that rock could be contemplative, not callow, and encouraged women who had always imagined popular music was somehow the preserve of men to pick up a guitar and begin aiming for stardom")

Ali and her excellent team do immense justice to the many profoundly moving songs that make up *Tapestry*. By Ali doing them all, the richly mind-expanding world of the intensely modest Carol King gets laid out before us. It encompasses all that has gone before.

It is no exaggeration to say the team gives towering performances across all the numbers. If Carole herself, in the full flush of her powers, had sung them for us she would likely not have bettered what we saw and heard at Circa one balmy Saturday night in 2022. Nobody can possibly do more. And goodness, we do really need it right now.

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