

Judy Whitmore Asks with Timeless Class: 'Can't We Be Friends?'

This year, plenty of folks have voiced a desire to return to better days, happier moments, and times filled with more connection. Though one new album can't repair all the world's woes, *Can't We Be Friends?*, from Los Angeles vocalist Judy Whitmore, does, in its own way, take listeners back in time.

A full length release of a dozen timeless songs carefully selected from the Great American Songbook, Whitmore's musical selections might be a comforting reminder of a more formal and elegant musical era gone by. But, as for Whitmore herself, the debut singer is much more a reflection of a person oriented toward the future over the past. Someone who can be deservedly bestowed with the descriptor of Renaissance woman, as much as anybody would likely celebrate and revel in the release of their first ever LP, *Can't We Be Friends?* is actually just the latest memento of personal accomplishment in Whitmore's extensive and widely varied resumé.



"I feel is a great sense of satisfaction having done this (album)," Whitmore says.

Able to claim credit to licensed pilot, cabaret performer and co-founder of the group Act Three, working parent, best-selling author, clinical psychologist, and now solo artist, Whitmore has truly worn many hats throughout her life. Still, Whitmore's satisfaction doesn't simply come from completion of yet another personal goal. It's also from recognizing the value of early lessons that brought her to this point and perhaps even more so, the realization of a true dream that's also followed Whitmore through most of her life.

"I'm very lucky that I've been able to have such a varied work life," Whitmore explains. "I had intended to have a life in music; that's what I thought I would be doing my whole life. And to be able to come back to the thing that I always wanted to do, it was my dream to do this."

"I remember my dad talking to me when I was very young," she continues, "he said, 'You can do anything you want, as long as you stick with it. If you give up, you'll never get anywhere.' And he said, 'Whatever it is that you want to do, I want you to remember this word: perseverance. Because that's what you need. That's what you need to do. And that has stayed with me my entire life.'"

In addition to her own earned accolades though, the very frame of life in which Whitmore's own fell, reads like the setting of a play crafted just for a Hollywood storyline.

Though it's not entirely rare for creative folks and aspiring artists to carry musical lineage and an artistic upbringing in their historical margins, Whitmore's musical roots are of a particularly regaled variety, with the strings of her past connecting to her grandfather, a violinist in the orchestra for none other than the legendary MGM Studios. Whitmore's perception of the iconic place where he played and worked was held in such high regard that even a rudimentary childhood errand to the studio made for an awe-inspiring experience.

"I remember once going with (my grandfather) to keep to pick up his (pay) check. Just being there at the studio, not even on a soundstage, but just being there in the office with him to pick up his his paycheck. How exciting was that? Because that (studio) was the place where magic happened," Whitmore says.

Fast forward to the present and though the wonder of childhood might seem prone to fading, Whitmore's enthusiasm has never waned, even during yet another innocent moment so many years later.

"(More recently,) I happened to be sitting right by the violin section (at the studio) and sitting right by the first violins," she says.

"I looked at the music stands – the music stands were so old, they all had ashtrays built into them! It was so fascinating because I know where my grandfather sat in the orchestra. I have pictures of them. And I realized I was sitting right next to the chair where my grandfather sat! And it was just electrifying to realize. I just imagined him sitting in that seat. And it was what a thrill to be in there and to be able to have that experience. Really was very poignant and very emotional. And I was so grateful that I was able to do that."

Whitmore's own name is a nod to one of the most recognized Judy's in musical history, Judy Garland – a fact that was impossible to forget given how much Whitmore's grandparents spoke of her.

"When I was very young, I thought, 'Oh, I must be related to (Judy Garland) because my name is Judy, and her name was Judy.'" says Whitmore. "But (my grandfather) would talk about how much he loved being in the studio when she was recording the music for you know, for her films. And he said that she was polite, and she was very nice. And he always talked about how talented she was. And that what a joy it was to be able to, you know, create music with somebody who was so talented. That's what I remember most him talking about – about her."



Still, even with her childhood steeped in so many fanciful stories and sentimental experiences Whitmore's collective accomplishments are hardly built upon, or simply a result of, legacy-laden fanfare.

"My mother knew that I was very interested in singing and performing. And from the time I can remember, I'm sure since I was probably six years old, I always took dance lessons (and) I took singing lessons," Whitmore says.

Furthermore, past having access to early lessons, the fire of Whitmore's bright career was ignited early on and perpetuated by her own attachment to, and even occasionally embrace of the fantasy in the arts – especially musical theater and dance.

"So here I am, taking dancing lessons from (Danny O'Connor's) brother (and) when you're six or seven years old and you're just so young and naive, I thought, 'Well, I'm just going to do really good in my dancing lessons so that I can be in the next Donald O'Connor movie.' So I was certain that was going to happen. And, you know, I just, I had all these fantasies about, you know, growing up and being in the movies and singing and dancing," says Whitmore.

"(Meanwhile,) I was taking singing lessons (and) I knew the words to almost all the Great American Songbook songs by the time I was 12 years old," she adds. "So I remember sitting in class when I was, you know, what, eight or nine years old and thinking that there was going to be an orchestra just appearing someplace because I was so used to watching this on television. I thought that was real. So I would sit in my craft. Yeah, I was I just prepared for that career."

Indeed, past what Whitmore took action to learn during her childhood, even the pursuits and successes she attained later in life were no cruise controlled tasks. Frankly, some of the transitions between her experiences – though initially random-looking from a distance – arose in quite poetically organic fashion. After earning her commercial pilot's license as a way to face a longtime fear of flight, for example, the resulting positivity from that achievement gave way to the formation of Whitmore's author hat when she recanted sentiments of air travel and the uniqueness of being a pilot in her critically acclaimed 2013 novel, *Come Fly With Me*.

"I think for all the different transitions that I've done... it's like it's sort of like if you see watercolors (and) you put like, like five or six blobs of watercolors on a piece of white paper and you draw a line through them. But it doesn't go from red, automatically to orange, it goes to like this little color in between. And it doesn't go from orange to blue, it goes to whatever that color is in between," Whitmore explains.

"And I feel like all the different transitions that I made in my life, were sort of gently going from one area to the next. And I think I did that because I feel that in my soul, I'm a great adventurer. So I think that's why it's so easy for me to transition from these different careers."

In light of just how fluidly and naturally Whitmore's whole journey appears when unfurled, the idea that *Can't We Be Friends?* ended up as an album fueled by traditional, beloved, American Songbook classics doesn't sound all that surprising. Given the kind of music Whitmore grew up around and wholeheartedly fell in love with, the musical foundations of her cabaret group, and the almost lore-like air of classic songs that rose from the lots of Capitol Records where Whitmore first got a taste of singing professionally during college, the choice to champion iconic American musical canon is an artistically full-circle decision.

"I wanted to do an album of this type of music because I think these Great American Songbook songs, they are just very important, and they're written by the most influential American composers," Whitmore affirms.

"This body of music, which was created for Broadway theaters, and for musical theater, and for Hollywood musical films, this kind of music was meant to uplift people, and to heal people who had been through you know, just so much stress and so much, just so much to get through, like I say, with wars and depression. I think that's why I think this music is so important. That is music that has stood the test of time."

Interestingly one experience that put Whitmore's valuation of this repertoire over the top didn't come from looking back at its surrounding history but actually an encounter in the present, that showed her first hand what it can mean if this classic music is left to slip through the cracks of time and memory.

"I recently was talking to a young man I think he was about, he must be about about 20, 21 years old. I played him the songs for my album and he said, 'All these songs are great!' Then he said to me, 'Did you write those songs?'" Whitmore explains.

"So, the songs from the album, these are these are songs by the Gershwins, by Jerome Kern, by Vernon Duke, by Sammy Cahn, by just, amazing American composers. And he thought I had written all these songs so that really reinforced my belief more than ever, that young people need to be exposed to this music."

Once the return to familiar material had set in place, subsequently choosing to record *Can't We Be Friends?* back at Capitol Records became an even bigger way for Whitmore to fold a touch of consistency and evolved revision into her otherwise very diverse legacy.

"For me, it felt important to go back to Capitol (Records), because – I must have been about 19 years old – I remember going for my audition there and I remember just feeling young and vulnerable. (But) now I'm older and you know, I'm much more secure than I was when I was 19 years old. And so it was, to me, a great accomplishment to be able to return there as a person doing my own album. So that's one of the reasons that I was very excited about going back," she says.

Reasoning and motivations aside, even with the acknowledgement of some familiarity, making *Can't We Be Friends?* remained a first for Whitmore right until the last track was mastered to disc. And though it may seem like someone as daring and multifaceted as Whitmore would by now have little to no fear, uncertainty, or difficulty with embracing a new experience, the Renaissance woman of high-flying accomplishment doesn't exaggerate this chapter of her story to incredulous heights. Instead of acting as an element meant to create grandiloquent status, *Can't We Be Friends?* simply serves as another mark of Judy Whitmore's hard work and a tangible symbol of her appreciation for the Great American Songbook that has brought so much joy into her life – something she really hopes finds a resonance with more people in younger generations.

"I'm hoping that there are people out there who still appreciate this kind of music. I think that's the (newest) challenge for me. Like I say, I love this music. And, and given this 20 year old that I just talked to the other day... I guess didn't know he liked this music but apparently he does. So that to me, that's the challenge."

Of course, while hoping to spread the joy and history of these early 20th century songs to the younger masses, Whitmore doesn't forget to step back and take in what *Can't We Be Friends?* means to her on an individual level. Whitmore's sense of accomplishment is well deserved but beyond that emotion, she's more than delighted in the intangible sense of belonging and resonance that's come about with this project; the record might be finished but for Whitmore she's just getting started.

"I'm very big into quotes," Whitmore shares, "I think this one is from George Elliot, who wrote, 'It's never too late to be who you were meant to be' and I feel like, finally, after doing so many different jobs, that I am finally doing the thing that I was meant to do."