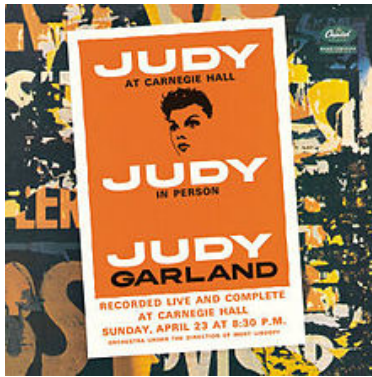


“Judy at Carnegie Hall”—Judy Garland (1961)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original album



Original label



Judy Garland

Few artists reach the pinnacle of their craft thirty-some years into their careers. But, then again, few artists are Judy Garland.

Judy Garland (1922-1969) was already a living legend by the time she recorded “Judy at Carnegie Hall” on Sunday, April 23rd of 1961. She had already been Dorothy in “The Wizard of Oz,” had thrown many a cinematic show on the back lot of MGM with frequent co-star Mickey Rooney, had introduced the Christmas standard “Have Yourself a Very Merry Christmas,” and had starred in the films “Meet Me in St. Louis,” “For Me and My Gal,” “Easter Parade,” “Summer Stock” and “A Star is Born.” And though she was already revered for her talent, by this time, Garland was almost nearly as famous for her stormy personal life (including marriages and divorces and frequent problems with alcohol and drugs) as she was for her creative output.

But, thankfully, by the time she took to the stage for her Carnegie Hall debut, Garland had (at least temporarily) left her demons behind and taken full control of her artistry. Fit both in form and voice, the show the 39 year-old Garland performed that night has been called “perfection” and “the greatest night in show business history.” Thankfully, the concert was recorded for posterity. When a recording of it was released in July of 1961, on Capitol Records, the album, “Judy at Carnegie Hall,” lived up to its already near-mythical hype with the strongest sales by far that Garland ever achieved. In this era, industry trade papers such as “Cash Box” and “Billboard” kept separate charts for mono and stereo albums. Stereo albums were priced higher and the top positions on these charts were often held by different records, but Garland’s double-album topped the mono and stereo charts for months, and the album would not fall off the charts until mid-1963. It would go on to grab the Grammy Award that year for Album of the Year. (It beat out works by Nat King Cole and Henry Mancini.) It would be the first album by a woman to ever be so honored.

Musically, the night was a mix of old and new. While Garland reprised many of her most famous songs from her films—including “Over the Rainbow” and “The Man That Got Away”—she also voiced (and made her own) such songs as “Come Rain or Come Shine,” “Puttin’ on the Ritz,” and “How Long Has This Been Going On?”

The concert was nothing short of a marathon-cum-tour de force. It was two hours long; the resulting recording of the concert had to be released as a two-disc set. Garland was off stage for only one brief intermission. The rest of the time it was just her and her audience of over 3,000 which included such fellow show biz luminaries as Phil Silvers, Comden and Green, Myrna Loy, Richard Burton, Carol Channing, Julie Andrews and Maurice Chevalier.

In Garland's concerts leading up to Carnegie, she and her then manager Freddie Fields had made a conscious choice to strip away from her all that was superfluous. In this show, there would be no costumes, no visual gags, no nostalgia-inducing sets. Garland and her orchestra were strong enough just on its own. (The courage of the concert's "no extras" staging was echoed in its now famous artwork: a black sketch of Garland's face over a solid red background emblazoned with only three overwhelming words--JUDY JUDY JUDY!)

Garland had originally become a star thanks to her strong and crystal-clear contralto voice which was showcased to wondrous effect on "You Made Me Love You" and "Over the Rainbow." But, by this point in her life, while her voice was still strong, it had also gained a bit of heft and a bit of wear. The altered texture upped the emotional quotient of many of her numbers, especially "The Man That Got Away" and the aforementioned "Over the Rainbow." The light rasp of her voice and its occasional quiver, along with her often bird-like frame (Garland stood only 4'11"), high-lighted Garland's endearing fragility. The latter is one of the elements that have made "Judy at Carnegie Hall" more than just a "show," more than just an enjoyable, notable recording.

"At Carnegie Hall" represented a phoenix-like re-ascension of an individual's power—personal and professional. It was a victory of the human spirit fueled by sheer will power and audience adoration. That Garland overcame all her previous troubles in order to give this one flawless concert was something not missed by anyone.

Reviews of the concert were spectacular. "Variety" wrote: "The tones are clear, the phrasing is meaningful and the vocal passion is catching. In fact, the audience couldn't resist anything she did." The "New York Post" wrote: "Last night, the magnetism was circulating from the moment she stepped on stage." And the "Long Island Press" said, "Judy Garland's concert at Carnegie Hall will go down in show business history."

The year of the Carnegie Hall concert, 1961, was a peak year for Judy Garland. And though a few successes would arrive later—including her troubled but splendid CBS variety show—'61 was to be the last major high point in a life and career of many highs and lows. Just before she played New York's Carnegie, she had already triumphed at the Palladium in London. She would follow it with a sold-out concert tour interrupted only long enough to take on a well-received supporting role in the film "Judgment at Nuremberg," a role for which she would be Oscar-nominated.

But after '61 though, there would be only two more films (the box office disappointments "A Child is Waiting" and "I Could Go on Singing") and a disastrous tour of Australia. There would also be another bad marriage, trouble with the IRS and, ultimately, a death in London that was possibly a suicide.

The death of Judy Garland in June of 1969 was the cause of widespread grief. Kids who knew her as Dorothy were bereaved, movie and music lovers mourned, and the impassioned gay audience who had frequently kept her afloat during her life became even more determined to elevate her to icon. (A wake for Garland held at a gay bar, the Stonewall Inn, in New York City, on the night of June 28, 1969, helped ignite the modern gay rights movement.)

Since her death, Garland's films, as the certified classics that they are, have never left the airwaves or the revival houses. And for fans of her music, "Judy at Carnegie Hall" has never gone out of print. (In fact, if anything, it's only been added to: later reissues of the album have include more of Garland speaking between songs.) And no artist since Garland has ever inspired the same sort of personal devotion and fan passion that she has. (Though Streisand, of course, comes close.)

Perhaps the ultimate tribute to Garland and, specifically, Garland at Carnegie Hall, arrived in June 2006 when pop star Rufus Wainwright decided to restage the April of 1961 concert, song for song, in a one-man show at Carnegie Hall and other top venues around the world. The resulting live CD “Rufus Does Judy at Carnegie Hall” was Grammy nominated for Best Traditional Pop Album. A DVD of the concert, which featured Garland’s daughter Lorna Luft as a special guest, was titled “Rufus! Rufus! Rufus! Does Judy! Judy! Judy!: Live from the London Palladium.”

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).