



Herbie Nichols **SUNG**

FAY VICTOR

*LIFE
IS
FUNNY
THAT WAY*



FAY VICTOR

FAY VICTOR, voice, lyrics, arrangements;
MICHAËL ATTIAS, alto & baritone saxophones; ANTHONY COLEMAN, piano
RATZO HARRIS, bass; TOM RAINEY, drums

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. LIFE IS FUNNY THAT WAY (6:32) | 7. TONIGHT (9:30) |
| 2. THE BASSIST (6:48) | 8. LADY SINGS THE BLUES (6:16) |
| 3. BRIGHT BUTTERFLY (2:49) | 9. TWELVE BARS (2:51) |
| 4. SINNERS, ALL OF US! (5:58) | 10. DESCENT INTO MADNESS (9:59) |
| 5. THE CULPRIT IS YOU (10:00) | 11. NON-FRATERNIZATION CLAUSE (6:12) |
| 6. SHUFFLE MONTGOMERY (5:33) | |

Original compositions by Herbie Nichols

All Lyrics & Arrangements by Fay Victor; © Fay Victor, ZOOT00N Publishing (ASCAP)
(except *Lady Sings The Blues*, lyrics by Billie Holiday)

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For complete catalog see **TAOForms.com**



L to R:
Anthony Coleman
Michaël Attias
Tom Rainey
Fay Victor
Ratzo Harris

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

MANY THANKS to the friends and heroes over the years that have ordained this project into being. Starting with the Netherlands for the introduction to Herbie Nichols,

I am ever grateful to have found him in my future husband's record collection. Hearing Nichols for the first time was like seeing a door open without yet knowing how to walk through. Yet I was determined to learn and try. What you'll hear is my dedication to a composer that makes my heart soar. To the heart of jazz, also a composer that fosters experimentation, pursuing all the places where the music can go. There are so many.

I want to acknowledge all of the amazing folks that have gone into making *Life Is Funny That Way* a reality and the end-point to a dream I had over 20 years ago, when I returned home to NYC.

Thank you to Misha Mengelberg and Roswell Rudd—bandleaders, mentors, friends and heroes who loved Herbie Nichols enough to share him with the world. I'm grateful to them both for the gentle nudge to keep writing for and performing Herbie's music. For me, Herbie's is the happiest music around. Thank you to Anthony, Michael, Ratzo and Tom for your smokin' contributions to the music—the music sizzles because of our time together and how you all create sound. We've opened new portals.

To Whit Dickey and Steven Joerg at TAO Forms for wanting to take on this massive project of recording Herbie Nichols SUNG. A true labor of love. Big thanks to Andy Taub at Brooklyn Recording for making the music sound rich. Further, I want to thank the great German pianist Achim Kaufmann for connecting with me over Nichols and Monk back in 2011, for being an inspiration and a part of the early development of Herbie Nichols SUNG. Thank you to all the fans and friends that have come by the Greenwich Music House, The Stone, the now sadly closed 55 Bar and even the Whitney Museum of American Art to hear Herbie Nichols SUNG, you were instrumental in how the music grew to where we are.

A special thank you to my ancestors, who protect and guide. Sharing this music with you is a dream fully realized. Trusting the universe. — *Fay, Callicoon, NY, October 2023*

LIFE IS FUNNY THAT WAY

“**MANY OF HERBIE’S MELODIES** are purely vocal,” trombonist Roswell Rudd wrote regarding pianist Herbie Nichols: “They are singable and meant to be sung.” Listen to a classic Nichols tune like “House Party Starting” or “2300 Skiddoo” and you’ll hear Roswell’s point: the pianist likes catchy short phrases (letting a singer catch her breath) and variational development to prompt improvised permutations. And his tunes move: they swing themselves. He wrote lyrics for a few of his songs himself.

Yet by 1987 when Rudd wrote that, only one singer had adopted a Nichols melody—the one who made it his most famous composition. In 1956, between pianists, Billie Holiday tried out a few, Nichols among them, and was taken with his recently recorded tune “Serenade.” She added a lyric, subtly recast the bridge, and retitled it “Lady Sings the Blues,” to tie in with her new autobiography of that name. She recorded the song that June, sang it at Carnegie Hall in November and at Newport ’57. Other singers covered it, but that was it for Nichols sung. Until Fay Victor arrived.

Herbie Nichols, the short version: After working in obscurity too long, the New York pianist recorded five trio sessions for Blue Note in 1955 and ’6 (and one for Bethlehem in 1957) that featured his slightly bent compositions and jabby Ellingtonian piano which foregrounded airborne melodic paraphrase. Fans included Mary Lou Williams and Charles Mingus. But record reviewers were only mildly positive, and sales were scant. Nichols kept working but was all but forgotten at his death at 44 in 1963.

His parents had come from the West Indies: Trinidad and Saint Kitts. He’d spent his first few years in the Caribbean neighborhood of San Juan Hill, Thelonious Monk’s turf. Calypso rhythms and steel-drum sonorities left their traces on his (and Monk’s) piano, complementing Herbie’s

audio impressions of street noise, tap dancers and audience chit-chatting. He got an opulent range of bright and dark colors from piano, and regularly divvied in breaks for his drummer (on record, Art Blakey, Max Roach, Dannie Richmond). The harmony behind a melody might conflict with the line, or move via unorthodox shortcuts: modulating from D-flat to C via a C augmented chord at the top of “House Party Starting” for example.



The Nichols story isn’t just about the pianist himself—it’s also about posthumous champions who put his music in circulation. To pay the bills, given a puzzling lack of demand for his own music, and given his flexibility and big ears, Nichols took a lot of trad/dixieland jobs. In later years he got to know a couple of younger white progressives who took such gigs and took a keen interest in his tunes, bassist Buell Neidlinger (who’d later make good on a pledge to Herbie to record his music with horns and strings, for the 1994 quintet gem *Blue Chopsticks*) and trombonist Roswell Rudd, who’d play Nichols music in all sorts of lineups, help research his life, and write notes to 1970s (Blue Note) and 1980s (Mosaic) reissues which kindled new interest. Pianists (among others) started covering his tunes. Frank Kimbrough recorded “House Party Starting” in 1988, and in the mid-’90s started playing the composer’s known and unknown material with his Herbie Nichols Project.

When Nichols’s Blue Notes were new, they had caught the ear of a young Dutch composer/pianist struck by Herbie’s fresh harmonic moves and pithy punchy phrasing. Misha Mengelberg with his own keen ears may’ve heard that Nichols shared his admiration for Ellington, Monk and Stravinsky. The Netherlands’ jazz fans follow Stateside developments closely, but judge their worth for themselves.

Nichols (like, say, Von Freeman) is held in higher regard there than in the States even now—no small thanks to Misha, who from the early 1980s featured Mengelberg arrangements of Nichols tunes in small groups and his ICP Orchestra, projects sometimes involving new ally Roswell Rudd.

Meanwhile, Fay Victor (short version) is born in New York in 1965 to parents from Grenada and from Trinidad, where she spent some of her early years: “I always say a feel culturally Caribbean,” she’d told me in 2014. As an aspiring jazz singer in the 1990s, she’d sung standards for three months in Japan accompanied by Bertha Hope, widow of Monk buddy Elmo Hope (who’d also caught Nichols’ ear), and a serious pianist in her own right in whom, in that same period, her sometime employer Frank Lowe detected a Nichols strain.

But even after Japan, Fay said, “I wasn’t good enough to work in New York, and I wanted to develop my craft. It seemed a good idea to move to Europe.” An encouraging visit prompted her to move to Amsterdam in 1995. There she eventually met her future husband, bass guitarist Jochem van Dijk, in whose record collection she discovered Herbie Nichols. She resolved to set lyrics to “House Party Starting”: its rising opening phrase was an invitation to step up. Seeking a score or lead sheet, she contacted Misha Mengelberg. (She thought he’d be scary, according to his reputation in some circles.) He didn’t have one handy—he’d recorded it in three settings but wasn’t a model archivist. Guitarist Anton Goudsmit had transcribed it however; it was his go-to tune at the conservatory. Victor recorded “House Party Starting” on her sophomore album *Darker than Blue*, recorded in New York in 2000, with a romping Goudsmit solo.

“I sent it to Misha and his response was, ‘It reminded me of nothing.’”

—That’s good, right?

“That is very good, but I didn’t know him yet, so it came across as rather cryptic.”

They stayed in contact even after she moved back to New York in 2003: “He really liked the lyrics, and encouraged my original music.” They did a flurry of trio, quartet and ICP gigs together between 2005 and 2010, mostly in Holland, with Nichols always in the mix. The first time she performed his music in New York was sitting in with Mengelberg at the Stone in 2005. “Around that time Misha said, ‘I think it’s time you connect with Roswell.’ We started exchanging emails, and after we met at a concert, we started getting together, playing Nichols tunes, just voice and trombone. Roswell knew him personally, so I’d ask what he was like. Roswell talked about how shy he was. There’s a real darkness about ‘House Party Starting,’ and understanding his personality helps me understand the piece so much better. To play rent parties for money, when you’re not a very social person, that must be, like, torture.” She and Ros first performed in public in 2009 when Tyshawn Sorey had a month at the Stone, and gave Fay a carte blanche set: the Victor/Rudd/Sorey trio of course did some Nichols. She sang on one track from Roswell’s 2013 album *Trombone for Lovers*. Rudd’s *Embrace*, released shortly before he died late in 2017, was for quartet with Fay, Lafayette Harris and Ken Filiano.

“When I’d moved back to New York, I knew I had to seek out another community. I’d come out of the mainstream jazz community, and I knew I wasn’t that anymore. So I went downtown.

“I formed the band Herbie Nichols SUNG in February 2013.” To her knowledge, Fay notes with understandable pride, it’s the first Nichols repertory project by a black or female musician, one where she very much calls the shots. “Solos aside, everyone is moving along to my script. They’ve all been in the band for 10 years except Tom Rainey. Michaël Attias had already been part of my Jazz Vault project where I was combining Nichols, Monk, Mingus and Ellington. I knew Attias knew Nichols’ work really well.” In 1994 that alto saxophonist and pan-Mediterranean wanderer had come to (downtown) New York where he soon connected with piano polymath Anthony Coleman, who in

his youth had hung out at Ellington gigs and got friendly with Duke. Fay Victor: “I had asked Anthony to join just when he was getting busy studying Herbie Nichols himself. Good timing. We used a few drummers—Rudy Royston, Michael Sarin, Devin Gray—before I ran into Tom Rainey in Vancouver in 2017. We recalled a nice concert we’d done with Michael Moore at the Stone a few years earlier, and then Tom said, ‘I’d love to play Nichols with you.’ I invited him to a gig and since then, whenever he was available I’d ask him.” One reason Rainey fits in: he and bassist Ratzo Harris first recorded together in 1980 and have teamed up numerous times, as in a long-running Kenny Werner trio. Fay: “They have a connection that’s just great: automatic chemistry.” SUNG developed the material over numerous gigs at 55 Bar, Greenwich Music House and elsewhere, and a sold-out show in a Whitney Museum series curated by Jason Moran. Roswell came to a gig to check out the band, and dug it. Frank Kimbrough, ditto.

Victor’s first Nichols lyric, for “House Party Starting,” riffs on the title (and snugly fits the melody’s phrasing). The stuttery opening of “The Gig” depicts a band struggling to sync up on the bandstand. Fay Victor abstracts from that scenario. Her tale, told from two points of view, is about a bandleader panicked by a no-show bassist, and the bassist’s own that’ll-show-’em rationale. The spark was Patrick Süskind’s 1981 solo stageplay *Der Kontrabass*, which exalts the instrument’s function but laments the bassist’s low status. “But it’s a drum feature too, focusing on—subtext subtext subtext—how Nichols loved the drums so much.” For a meta touch, bass is in fact absent on “The Bassist.” (It’s surely part of the joke that Ratzo Harris is ever-dependable here and elsewhere.)

The light touch and sharp edge of the lyric “Life Is Funny That Way” suggests Nichols’ own versifying. I’m particularly fond of Victor’s short-short-story “Non-Fraternization Clause” (where the band’s free-jazz rubato is a thing of beauty, and that parting

“regretfully” is a heartbreaker). The audacious “Sinners, All of Us!” turns Herbie’s “The Happenings” into a down-by-the-riverside revival meeting. “I really emphasized the march aspect, and suggested to Tom a tripletized idea of a march—a triplet march?—which lent itself to the sternness of a preacher.” Fay does the Holiday lyric to “Lady Sings the Blues” but her bridge hews closer to Herbie’s original melody.

She puts her all into words and music, seriously playful. The band goads her on, synced or swimming. Coleman who knows his New York piano history drops a few Nicholsy phrases here and there, as on two flat-out swingers graced by Attias’s burly bari sax, “Tonight (House Party Starting)” and “Shuffle Montgomery.” (No lyric there: “I just wanted to blow.”) But the rhythm-section feature “12 Bars” confirms Coleman and company aren’t looking to recreate the Nichols trio. (This band marks the first time downtown vets Coleman and Rainey have worked together.) There’s a lovely episode deep in “The Culprit Is You” where piano and Attias’s alto have a bit of Misha-like fun mangling “2300 Skiddoo.” Delayed entrances keep you guessing whether the full band will show up before a track’s over. “Bright Butterfly” is for three single-line melodic voices, arco bass included.

John Zorn juggled the Stone’s schedule to let Fay curate a four-night centennial tribute to Nichols in January 2019, tapping Kimbrough’s crew, Roswell’s Trombone Tribe, and solo pianists Coleman, Vijay Iyer and Aruán Ortiz. And SUNG of course. She’d heard about the booking just in time to let the dying Roswell Rudd know. Now that the first Nichols champions are gone, she (among others) carries on keeping his legacy alive. Thank you, Fay Victor, for believing your ears.

– Kevin Whitehead / May 2023

LIFE IS FUNNY THAT WAY

Stop and take my picture
Posing like a clown
On the ground
that superstar
Stop and save the present
Put your real life down
For glory found

Can't be in the moment
No canned sound around
Toned it down
like a painter
Keep the colors muted
Then you're safe and sound
so I won't drown

You know it smells like fear
to be who you are

If you've got a ticket
let me be a hound
to wraparound the meaning of
living to be truthful, breaking walls away on the rebound
Life is funny that way,
Life is funny that way

THE BASSIST

Where's he gone
Oh did he slip away
somehow
what now, what now, what now
what am I gonna do

I'm at home
I can't deal today
OK
and now they'll really feel
just how well I play

Time has come
the crowd is getting glum
how dumb
No scene without some skin, so give the drummer some

Wasn't that Solo fine
from beginning to end
I can sing a bass line here
freedom rings out everywhere!

BRIGHT BUTTERFLY

I'll see
you again
my friend
for sure
Don't know when that will be
a butterfly with bright wings
will come see me
soaring
Time will
come that
I will
hold your hand
Till that day I won't despair
Feeling your love, crystal clear

SINNERS, ALL OF US!

The new guy's come to town
They say it's going down
The tent across the river, he'll have his say
That he is sad
We sin so bad
And he is glad
To preach like mad
In charismatic green
We listen in awe and stomp for more!

The new guy hangs around
With disdain and a frown
Judging and accusing, how we will pay
Finger in air
An intent stare
And he is clear
We've got to fear
The world and all we've been
We listen in awe and stomp for more!

THE CULPRIT IS YOU

Are you hiding from the love in your heart?
Are you running from the fear love will start?
Have you heard you're cold, lonesome
and blue?
The culprit is you, the culprit is you

Do you keep out trust and joy from your life?
Do you focus on disquiet and strife?
Have you heard you're cold, lonesome
and blue?
The culprit is you, the culprit is you

You've been living all these years in a shell with yourself
You never gave to yourself, the care and gift of being yourself
The reason why you're here on this earth

Will you ride the fence when life starts to fade?
Make excuses for the choices you made
It's time to change being lonesome and blue
The culprit is you, the culprit is you
Find the life you want, find the love you are, you've got nothing to lose!

TONIGHT

Got that man out my way
He's gone and that's the way it will stay
Better get my pots warm
Well all my friends are coming today

It was time for a change
This what I'm trying to say
Festivities commencing
House Party Starting Tonight

I think I made the right move
So gather round we'll get out the news
Cause to celebrate
And bring out all my LP's and booze
Need to clear out my head
I've been feeling low and confused
I've got myself together
House Party Starting tonight

Come tomorrow morning
I'll be laughing and hungover from the long night before
I won't be crying
The blues I would have walked out my door

So don't be too late
The food is brewing I can't wait
Got my house nice and clean
There's room enough so please bring a date
Life is starting anew
I want to toast my future and fate
Happy times forever
House Party Starting tonight

DESCENT INTO MADNESS

Why me, I never thought that he'd leave me this way
All alone to leisurely, gently unravel, traveling round.

Woe is me I get advice don't agree
Clinging to a side of a well that's slowly disintegrating.

Come to me, whispers the madness in the trees
Deprives, my eyes of memories

Talk to me; convince me I'm not crazy

Just need a dose of time to unwind
And give life another try-try-try-try-try

Commit me; help curtail the lunacy
Clawing my way down to a place
That stifles me permanently, you see.

NON-FRATERNIZATION CLAUSE

When I see you walking down the hallway
Adrenaline starts to pump through my veins
A sweet commotion that's unspoken though it's understood

A glimpse of you first thing in the morning
Sends shockwaves through my delirious brain
I stay real cool though rumblings are underfoot

A co-worker notices my reaction
When your voice is within hearing range

We wouldn't stand a chance
No possible office romance
They informed us in advance
That is the official stance
Regretfully

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