

NEWS

Liz Story On Her Return To The Stage And 40 Years Of 'Solid Colors'

Windham Hill solo piano legend is performing again after a 2019 brain hemorrhage

Written by Jonathan Cohen | November 22, 2023 - 10:00 am



[Home](#) » [News](#) » [Liz Story On Her Return To The Stage And 40 Years Of 'Solid Colors'](#)



In 1976, the Sex Pistols–led punk movement was raging across the Atlantic, but here in President Gerald R. Ford’s America, candy-coated radio pap such as Barry Manilow’s “I Write the Songs,” Rick Dees’ “Disco Duck (Part 1),” and Leo Sayer’s “You Make Me Feel Like Dancing” remained the order of the day. At least Paul Simon’s “50 Ways To Leave Your Lover” had a funky beat and some inventive chord changes, but it was still rather thin gruel for more adventurous listeners of the time.

Luckily for them, an acoustic guitar virtuoso and college dropout named William Ackerman had just founded [Windham Hill Records](#) in Stanford, Ca., and by 1981, the label had single-handedly (and quite unintentionally) launched the new age music movement. Led by the bald, bespectacled, nature-inspired pianist George Winston, Ackerman’s dexterous, guitar-playing cousin Alex de Grassi, and a dreadlocked, six-string wunderkind named Michael Hedges, Windham Hill became an out-of-nowhere sensation by offering what the *New York Times* [described in 1986](#) as “impressionistic instrumental music that eludes prompt categorization,” “music for grown-up hippies,” and “soft jazz for music lovers who can’t stand rock.”

Years before Windham Hill released her landmark 1983 solo piano debut, *Solid Colors*, [Liz Story](#) was also on the hunt for something she hadn’t yet heard. Having studied and performed classical music since childhood, she knew nothing about improvisation until enrolling at New York’s Hunter College in the mid-’70s. After repeated entreaties by her brother, she eventually went to watch the late Bill Evans play to a half-full house at the venerable West Village jazz club the Bottom Line.

Gobsmacked by Evans’ lack of on-stage sheet music, she waited patiently after the gig to ask if he’d give her lessons. He demurred, but instead recommended another legend, Sanford Gold, with whom Story studied after returning to her native Southern California. Back home, she got a regular gig playing at an L.A.-area restaurant and started improvising her own originals, largely because the club’s upright piano was missing its front face and as such left her nowhere to put her music.



Also Read

[George Winston, Solo Pianist Synonymous With New Age Music, Dies At 73](#)

“As a birthday gift to me, my then-husband knew that I was working on all this stuff and he had a friend record me playing all the pieces on a cassette,” Story recalls. “I remember listening to it and thinking, oh, I don’t know. One day when I was borrowing my sister’s car, she had the cassette, and when I heard

it again, I went, huh! Actually, that's not that bad. I gave it to a friend to listen to, and she was the one who said, you *have* to send this to Will Ackerman."

The cassette arrived at Windham Hill's humble Stanford post office box, which had been deluged by unsolicited demos as the label grew in visibility. Ackerman received the tape, quickly fell in love, and, after a thumbs-up from Winston, signed Story to the label, where for the next decade her deeply felt, jazz-tinged piano solos helped her become one of Windham Hill's most beloved acts.

Nearly 40 years later, it was Ackerman, 74, who introduced Story, now 73, from the stage before her Nov. 11 sold-out comeback concert at New York's Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall — a bittersweet full circle moment in the wake of [Winston's death](#) in June after a long cancer battle and Story's own recovery from a bilateral subdural hematoma in 2019, which sidelined her from the stage for three years while she relearned how to play her instrument at home in Prescott, Az.

"Even as Windham Hill grew, my criteria for what would become a recording for Windham Hill was pretty simple," Ackerman tells *SPIN* over email. "1. It had to move me emotionally. 2. Whatever influences might be part of the picture, the artist had to sound like no one else. 3. They had to be someone who I felt I could work with co-operatively, which required a friendship of trust going both ways. 4. They would widen the scope of the label without being too far outside of the emotional definition that characterized it. Liz had, and continues to have, all those elements in her artistry. I'm grateful for all she did to elevate Windham Hill's catalog, and sitting in row two at her concert, I was looking at a dear, dear friend who I admire and genuinely care for as a human being."

Three days after Carnegie Hall, Story is still in what she describes as "an altered state" when *SPIN* meets her at the Chelsea penthouse of the Omomuki Foundation's Geoffrey Hofer, who has spent the past four years helping archive her work and overseeing the first widespread digital release of both her full discography and [sheet music transcriptions](#). In August, Windham Hill catalog owner Sony Music issued the 30-song [The Essential Liz Story](#), and on Friday (Nov. 24) will unveil the 29-track *Songs of Christmas*, rounding up all of her holiday music in one collection. The latter includes more than a dozen rare Story songs from Windham Hill's familiar seasonal compilations, most of which have been out of print for decades and never available on streaming services.

At Carnegie, Story performed *Solid Colors* in its entirety for the first time, delighting the audience with jokes ("Did this album come out when I was 11?") and anecdotes about its conception ("Things With Wings" was named so because her pet parakeet flew over and landed on the piano while she was writing it). Her playing was focused but not beholden to the material's recorded incarnations, as she wove in subtle melodic variations, inverted chords, and tempo shifts. The *Solid Colors* portion closed with a cover of Evans' plaintive "Peace Piece," another nod to Story's pre-Windham Hill transformation

from classical automaton to free-spirited improviser.

“Let’s say there are five takes of me playing a song on *Solid Colors*, including the one that ended up on the album,” says Story, who alternately quotes Leonard Bernstein, e.e. cummings, a *New Yorker* cartoon, and the Cistercian Trappist monk Thomas Merton in our conversation. “If you were to listen to the other four, you’d go, that’s the same piece? I remember once after a show I was signing CDs and this woman said, I wish you would have played blah blah blah, and I went, ooh, I did (laughs). Last Saturday night, people who have listened a lot to *Solid Colors* may have watched me and thought, that was interesting. What? She did what? I’m a little goofy that way.”

Spending time with Ackerman reminded Story of both the camaraderie between and virtuosity of the core Windham Hill artists in the ‘80s, a vibe best captured on the essential 1982 album *An Evening With Windham Hill Live*. She remembers the major key-favoring Winston once playfully asking her why she began her song “Wedding Rain” with such dissonant notes, and another instance when Hedges almost scared her off from playing one of her own compositions.

“The very first time that I met Michael, we were doing a show with a bunch of us from the label,” she says. “Michael was sitting at the piano already. He was playing [the title track from] *Solid Colors* and I went, what? I thought he was just a guitarist! I said to myself, I hope I play the song that well later tonight.”

Looking ahead, Story won’t rule out recording some new compositions (“Actually, I did start something, but I decided, no ... not until after Carnegie”), but, inspired by the outpouring of support in the wake of her illness, is more interested in utilizing her future concerts as a way to give back to humanity at large. Her next scheduled show will be Jan. 19 at the Buckman Performing and Fine Arts Center in Memphis.

“I was a caregiver for my parents for several years before they died, so I’m very interested in doing some concerts that could benefit other people,” she says. “I would look forward to that. I would like to be able to have the feeling that I’m not just on the road making money and touring, so if you have some deep, profound thing you want to support, let me know.”

Best of all, Story has rekindled her love of the piano, which has been a crucial palliative during a time of great personal challenge. “It’s not just a state of mind,” she says, walking over to Hoefler’s Steinway Grand to demonstrate the difference between a major scale and its individual triads. “It’s an actual feeling, of an energetic quality. It’s like going for a walk as opposed to just thinking about something. The physical nature of it is so essential and brings you into the intimacy of the moment. My entire musical everything is at the piano.”