

Arts & Humanities

Young Lion

Review: *Peter Cincotti* (Concord Records, March 2003).

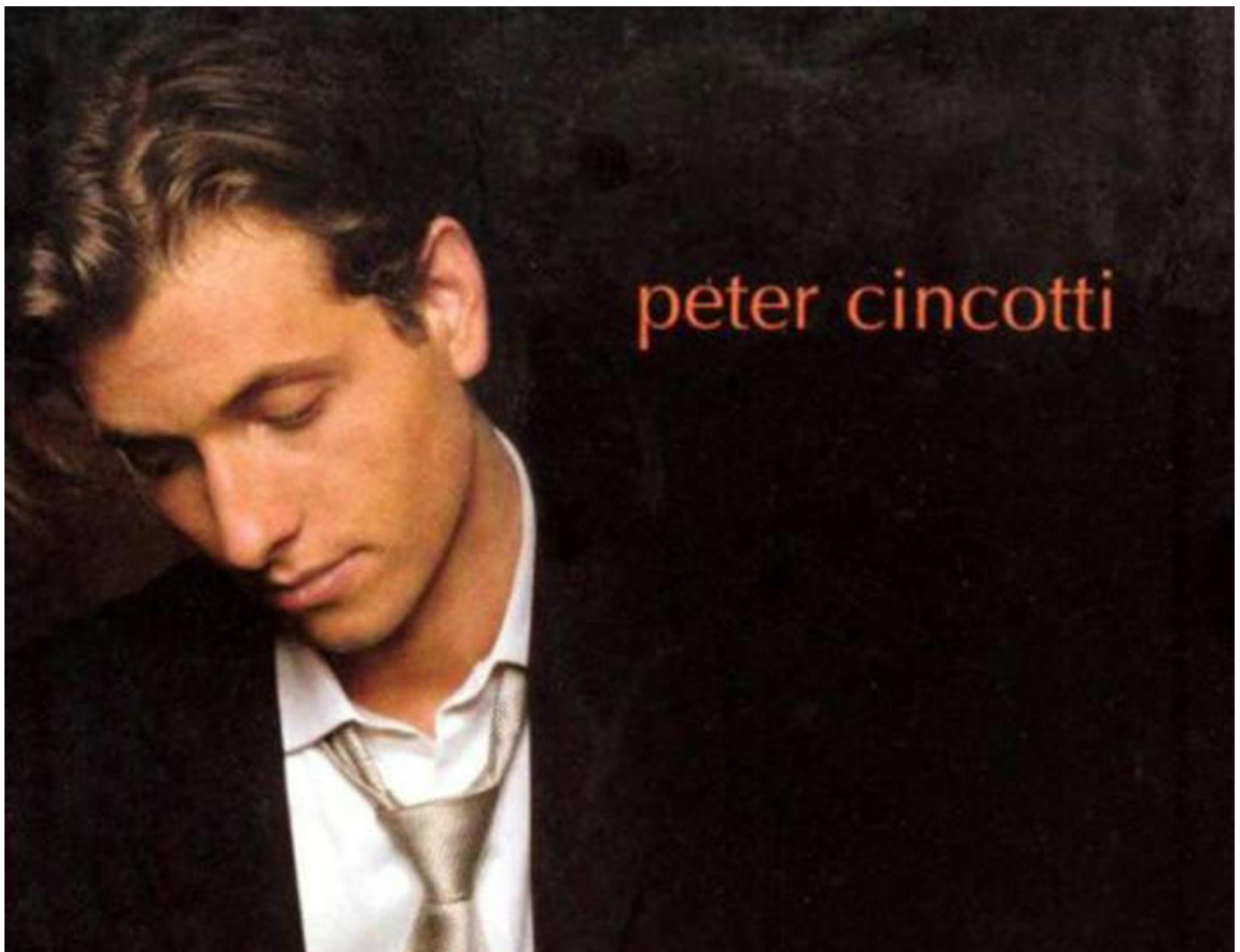
Peter Cincotti, piano and vocals; David Finck, bass; Scott Kreytzer, tenor saxophone; and Kenny Washington, drums.

By

Harold Bauld '77CC

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If anything by a teenager can be said to be “long awaited,” it’s this debut CD by pianist and singer Peter Cincotti ’05CC, whose live gigs have already inspired an armada of media admiration. *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Vanity Fair*, the *Today* show, even Liz Smith and David Letterman have gushed over his evocation of the great pop-jazz crooners of the past.

Although he gets a lot of mileage out of the retro heartthrob look—the untamed Gatsby coif and Dean Martin eyes—Cincotti’s eponymous Concord Records CD, released this past spring during his sophomore year at Columbia College, introduces a remarkably assured and cagey cabaret pianist who swings with precocious restraint. Though he is the youngest-ever headliner at the prestigious Oak Room of the Algonquin Hotel, he doesn’t try to play everything he knows on every tune—a common fault of young lions. His solos on the standards “Comes Love” and “You Stepped Out of a Dream” find a simple motif and develop it with a terse wit that doesn’t upstage his singing. On “Sway,” which receives a stop-and-go rumba treatment, he leaves enough space to drive a Great American Songbook through. Yet later on in the album he opens up with both hands into a frank and convincing Erroll Garner imitation on an unlikely vehicle, the Blood, Sweat and Tears tune “Spinning Wheel.” Toward the end of his solo on a medium swinger, a Cincotti original called “Are You the One?” a sudden rain of 32nd notes pours down out of the blue but right on the mark.

Behind his playing there’s a love of selected, if not eclectic, jazz history: he bursts into fluent Harlem stride during “Ain’t Misbehavin’,” and in his comping under the hard-bop tenor solos of Scott Kretzer on “You Stepped Out of a Dream,” some spare modal voicings right out of Bill Evans float around the edges of his more usual percussive attack.

As an accompanist for his voice, he’s clean and spare, swinging with a sometimes subtle, sometimes funky drive, and there’s a productive tension between his spookily Sinatra-like behind-the-beat vocals and the rhythmic push of his more instrumental touch and bluesy fills.

Most of the fuss and speculation on his promising future is about Cincotti as a singer. His timbre, phrasing, diction, and range all have a Sinatra return address (with occasional detours through Mr. Bennett’s Neigh-berhood), and Frank-hounds will

enjoy citing chapter and verse sources for some of Cincotti's moves on a tune like "Miss Brown." Though he's a chameleon at this stage, he's clearly also trying to carve out a more personal sound, particularly by undertaking unusual material such as the theme from The Godfather, "Come Live Your Life with Me." Cincotti sings the original and unfamiliar lyrics rubato, and he turns it into a painfully lovely, elegiac ballad. His romantic medley "Fool on the Hill/Nature Boy" has some currency because of its appearance in the movie Moulin Rouge. The riskiest choice on the CD is "Rainbow Connec-tion," a song until now "owned" by, um, Kermit the Frog. With only a hint of irony, Cincotti affectionately milks the sentimental pop idealism of the tune; it's the least jazz-oriented cut on the record.

Three of the songs are originals; his mother and sister contributed the lyrics. He's a solid if sometimes derivative composer. "Are You the One?" owes a bit too much to "Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby?" for example, and perhaps not surprisingly, Cincotti's baritone channels Sinatra most on one of his own tunes, a brassy straight-ahead piece called "I Changed the Rules."

Produced by the legendary Phil Ramone, the CD is the debut of an appealing and versatile talent at the beginning of a high-profile career.

Harry Bauld '77CC has written about jazz for Boston Magazine and The Green Mountain Jazz Messenger, among others. He is chair of the English Department at Putney School in Vermont and plays occasional gigs as a pianist.

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