

NOT OUT OF  
BREATH:  
Judy Collins,  
recording  
since the '60s



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# Judy's 'American Girl' power

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**D**on't bother to tell Judy Collins to break a leg before she plays tomorrow night at the Beacon Theater.

She's already taken care of that part.

"Skiing accident," confesses Collins. "Not even skiing, really. I was getting off the lift."

Fortunately, her doctor said the magic words — "no surgery, no cast" — so it won't keep her from taking the stage to unveil songs from "Portrait of an American Girl," her first studio album in nearly a decade.

"I can't tell you how excited I am about this," says Collins. "I don't think I've ever made an album as good as this one."

A lot of artists say things like that, of course, and in Collins' case, "American Girl" must be measured against classics like "In My Life," "Who Knows Where the Time Goes," "Wildflowers" and "Judith."

But the new one deserves to be in that discussion, with the additional good news that Collins' voice may be

better than ever — a happy fact she attributes to 32 years of study with a master of bel canto singing, a style that emphasizes clarity.

"American Girl" also reminds everyone that while Collins arrived with the "folk" wave of the '60s, her music stretches from classical to gospel, from Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen to "Amazing Grace" and back to the Rolling Stones and Stephen Sondheim, whose "Send in the Clowns" she placed on the pop charts in 1975.

"American Girl" includes Joni Mitchell's "Midway," the stirring "Lincoln Portrait" and the '60s pop gem "Sally Go Round the Roses." Not by accident, the record opens and closes with lovely songs about singing, "Singing Lessons" and "How Can I Keep From Singing?"

"My freedom is in that breadth," says Collins. "If I gave this music to most record companies, they wouldn't know what to do with it. They try to make music fit a category, which is why some artists get pushed and pulled until they don't even know who they are anymore."

"With 45 years of experience, I have a pretty good sense for what I should be singing."

Since she can now record on her own label, Wildflower, on her own schedule, she says she also found she grew into several of the songs.

"I was a little scared about doing 'Lincoln Portrait,' but I felt compelled to. It says so much about who we are. Then I spent a long time figuring out how to do 'Pacing the Cage.' I love the song, but it has a line about hanging up your boots, which isn't true for me. So I finally did that line as an observer, not the person who feels it."

Like all of Collins' best recordings, "American Girl" returns often to wistfulness.

"I don't think I could ever make a whole album of happy songs," she says. "Life is too complex. Too many emotions."

At the Beacon, as on "American Girl," she'll work on covering them all.

"You try to make it a journey that's fulfilling," she says. "For the performer and the listener."