

Robbie Woliver
Director, New York Music Hall of Fame

I have been a fan of Lili Añel for years, but with *I Can See Bliss From Here*, her sixth recording, I have found a new, unexpected appreciation, amid an already multi-layered reverence for her music. *Bliss* is that album that every artist hopes for—Joni Mitchell's *Blue*, Springsteen's *Nebraska*, the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's*—the one that redefines them. This is Lili's breakthrough, a brilliant amalgam of first-rate vocalizing, songwriting, arrangement and production.

Añel, a New York-bred singer-songwriter now based in Philadelphia, was raised in Spanish Harlem soaking up the musical roots of her Cuban-African-American heritage. Professionally, she grew up in the same Greenwich Village circle as Suzanne Vega, Shawn Colvin and Lucinda Williams. But unlike those singer-songwriters, who had a distinct style that was easy to capitalize on, Añel's approach was more complex and therefore more difficult to categorize.

One set of ears would compare her to Joan Armatrading; another, Phoebe Snow. One listener would say Nina Simone, while another would hear Joni Mitchell or Sade. Even comparisons to Paul Simon, one of her musical idols, are rightfully proffered.

Comparisons can be helpful; they are guideposts. But the truth is that Lili is not "the next Sade" She is a unique original; a fusion of those familiar signposts, but a talent completely distinctive and matchless. That said, wait'll you hear her channel Al Green in "Blindsided #2". Same goes for genre. She isn't just a pop or jazz artist; she isn't solely a folkie or R&B singer—she is a singer-songwriter who transcends style. And there needs to be a place in the musical pantheon for an artist like that.

I've been following Lili's career since she used to perform at my music venue, the legendary Gerdes Folk City, where she took the same stage as greats like Bob Dylan, Judy Collins and Paul Simon, and she did them proud. She was one of the most popular and inimitable artists in a group that included many great talents, with one important quality—she was different enough to stand out. Honors followed as she garnered continual critical praise and won numerous New York Music Awards for her vocals, her songwriting and her recordings. She produced one memorable album after another, and she continued to perform to adoring fans.

But *Bliss* is one step beyond the Lili Añel we all think we know. Her songwriting, now informed by the recent economic downturn and the personal challenges that

came along with it, has had her plumb deeper than ever before. She's accomplished the almost impossible feat of turning topical situations into accessible songs. With *Bliss*, a Grammy-worthy recording, Lili has secured herself a place as an artist to be reckoned with, one that cannot be ignored.

Let's start with that incomparable smooth-as-honey voice. From soaring high notes to alto-deep primality, her rich timbre is what makes her so distinctive and drives the profound emotion of her songs. Her persuasive, percussive guitar playing is the perfect companion to a vocal that sways and slides through very expressive lyrics and often jazz-tinged melodies. Her superb vocalese is all about shadows, notes and phrasing standing outside and flitting between.

The lilting, complex ballads—some being Jobim-worthy—are stunning, and her honest lyrics just pierce the soul. Añel also plays a bit with stronger Latin rhythms, as with "Something To Do," which is one of the most autobiographical works she's recorded, along with "Best Part of Me," a beautiful love song to her son, Joey, and an homage to motherhood. "Go Home", the album's biggest revelation, is an infectious field-holler-styled blues lament that takes modern-day work drudgery to another level. Another surprise stand-out is Lili's killer interpretation of Ray LaMontagne's "This Love is Over," in which she completely reinvents the song in a captivating R&B groove that'll plant itself in your head for a long time. "Out of Control", with its spine-tingling lyric, is so filled with musical surprises, both instrumental and sung, it's a musical firework.

Much praise for the success of this recording goes to Dale Melton who co-produced this recording with Lili. The musicians, all first-rate, are so skilled at subtlety, allowing Lili to shine front and center while still providing breathtaking musicality.

Bliss is a gem. Lili Añel is one of the most exciting contemporary artists around. It is a shoe-in for many year-end "best of" lists, and it will certainly have you wear out that "repeat" function on your iPod.

