

THE NEW YORK OBSERVER

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One Terrific Show to See

After paying his dues in small clubs and big tours with Liza Minnelli, Johnny Rodgers

(spelled with a "d" like Richard Rodgers, not with a "g" like Ginger Rogers and Roy Rogers) has finally landed a well-deserved three-week gig

at the Algonquin's fabled Oak Room. With thatched blond hair and a friendly, aw-shucks demeanor that was meant to be showcased in gingham shirts and jeans, this quintessential all-American boy exudes youth, optimism and vitamin C. He is also a tremendously talented jazz-pop musician who vaults from classics like

"Any Place I Hang My Hat Is Home" to a hilarious "Huggin' & Chalkin'" (popularized on record by Hoagy Carmichael) with the ease of a trapeze artist, pulling notes out of the ozone and making them sound newly discovered. He calls his show "What a Wonderful World" and proceeds to prove it, with a feel-good selection of take-home tunes guaranteed to pep up the most dyspeptic cynic.

Expect surprises. A silk foulard scarf that is stuffed into Joe Ravo's guitar on "Change in Me," by the great Carol Hall, makes it sound exactly like a banjo. Swinging Johnny Mercer's celebrated lyrics to "Too Marvelous for Words" accompanied only by Brian Glassman's bass lines makes the rhyming of "spectacular" with "vernacular" especially witty. I usually dread singer-pianists who devote more than 50 percent of the show to their own compositions, but Mr. Rodgers writes rhythmic, infectious harmonies with solid and touching lyrics. From a gorgeous bossa nova called "She," to "One More Moment," an award-winning love song with collaborator Lina Koutrakos, Johnny comes to the welcome conclusion that even in a time of catastrophe, there's not much to worry about. With music like this, time will heal, love will re-bloom and the sunny side of life is just around the corner. No flowery phrases or high-hat 4/4 canned rhythms here, just a jazzy one-hour display of pure pleasure that turns tickling the ivories into a vibrant show business workout. Except for a wet brow and beads of sweat slowly trickling into his teal-blue satin shirt, Johnny Rodgers makes it all seem effortless. One terrific performer, and one terrific show.



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