Massapequa, New York, an enclave with a rich and deep musical history, has produced few artists as talented and loved as jazz-pianist/pop-vocalist John Ambrosini. Ambrosini remains a friend and inspiration to many of us that hail from “Matzah-pizza,” and certainly to those beyond. The exceptional quality of Ambrosini’s new CD “SONGS FOR YOU” prompted me to dust off the old noggin and put on my music reviewer’s hat one more time. This collection of songs is that good.

If you have eclectic musical taste that encompasses such iconic artists as James Taylor, Steely Dan and Radiohead, then “SONGS FOR YOU” is for you. If you enjoy a bit of jazz that is both sophisticated and accessible, these tunes will captivate you as well. Despite resting on the jazz side of the ledger, “SONGS FOR YOU” is simultaneously a unique pop-jazz-hybrid, that gently challenges one’s aural expectations, while weaving in continuous, refashioned bursts of the familiar.

“SONGS FOR YOU” strength lies in the marriage of craft and passion. In addition to filling the roles of band leader, arranger, lead singer, co-producer and pianist, Ambrosini composed two of the CD’s songs.  He also assembled a core group of stellar musicians, that brings to fruition his genre bending vision.

This foundational ensemble consists of Steven Finkelstein (percussion), Matt Miller (drums), Zachary Swanson (acoustic bass) and David Phelps (guitar). This is an agile experimental group, that transverses styles from pop to bop, often within the same song. Finkelstein, Miller and Swanson form a formidable often percolating bottom, that Ambrosini and Phelps glide over or mesh with, producing textures and sounds that leapfrog between styles. Think Keith Jarrett to Stevie Ray Vaughan, and you have a glimpse of the serpentine woven tapestry at play.

There is also a formidable harmonic presence here, in the form of back up vocalists Christine Ambrosini (John’s wife) and Amanda Bloom. They bring a misty, beatific sirens-on-the-shore element, that adds both spooky atmospherics and declarative reinforcement of the lead vocal. The John Ambrosini/Rich Lamb production team and the mastering done by Mike Marciano, allows the music to both breathe and soar. There are moments of unadorned stark beauty, and joyful deluges of sound—all within a crystalline mix.

If there is a secret sauce that further elevates the entire enterprise, it is the iconic selection of soloists that appear on the tunes. For those who are jazz/studio-musician enthusiasts, the lineup of Randy Brecker (trumpet), David Binney (alto saxophone), Joel Frahm (tenor saxophone), William Galison (harmonica) and Ada Rovatti (tenor saxophone) speaks for itself. A criminally abbreviated communal list of these players’ musical collaborators includes-Frank Sinatra, Art Blakey, Norah Jones, Stevie Wonder, John McLaughlin, Aerosmith, Brad Mehldau, Sting and Peggy Lee. True to form, each soloist expands the story line of the compositions in ways both combustible and discerning.

The novelty embedded in the arrangements for all of “SONGS FOR YOU” tracks, keeps the CD feeling fresh from start to finish. Listening to these reimagined classics is like having a kick-ass time at a high-school reunion. One is fueled by a giddy appreciation of the unexpected maturity and innate spirit of old friends.

There are twelve songs on this recording – ten covers and two originals; each one unique in its interpretation yet still part of a whole ‘vibe’ that extends across the album. Here is a brief exploration of a few selected tracks can best highlight this “old is new” dynamic.

“Midnight Rider” opens with that timeless hypnotic riff, but soon after, the addition of micro-jazz runs on the piano and a hovering ice-frosting of ethereal background vocals, announce a new direction and listening experience. There is a structured looseness to the arrangement, with well-defined featured solos blending into periods of more free-form jazz. Ambrosini’s lead vocal captures both the glory and isolation of the song’s protagonist, while Rovatti’s tenor sax solo achingly points to its unwavering nature.

“Sweet Baby James” transverses both lush and spacious terrain.  Finkelstein’s use of chimes and Miller’s sensitive cymbal work add a celestial element. Ambrosini’s vocal has an earnest quality, creating a sense of respect in his narration of the cowboy’s tale. Binney’s alto sax and Galison’s harmonica solos embody the power of restraint, while conjuring the warm glow of a campfire on the prairie.

“New York State of Mind” brings a melodic and spirited point counterpoint exchange, between Ambrosini’s lead vocal and Frahm’s tenor sax. The backing vocals, in Greek chorus mode, universalize the bittersweet longing for Gotham, so central to the song’s emotional pull. With the aura of the song’s established storyline hanging in the air, the outro turns a corner— cascading into a blues vamp-freakout jam with solo flares sparking from all directions.

“Lover”, one of the two Ambrosini compositions on the CD (the other being, “Maybe I’m Crazy”) finds the band in full flight. Swanson’s melodic bass runs, Miller’s shimmering cymbal hits and Finkelstein’s perfectly placed spasms of fluttering percussion, create a lively bottom for Ambrosini, Phelps, and Brecker to solo over. The song is a simmering meditation on lost love and the hope of its resurrection. There is an acuteness to the soloing, expressing hope in the face of the glaring unknown. Brecker’s melodic and poignant trumpet solo will stay with you after the song ends.

The rest of the album is equally strong. I suggest you check it out! For those who do, please share your listening experience. In turbulent times, great music can serve as a balm to the soul. “SONGS FOR YOU” has arrived in a timely fashion.