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The 'Tender Heart' of late Philly jazz guitarist Tom Giacabetti

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by **Shaun Brady**, FOR THE INQUIRER

Last December, a small group of friends and family gathered at Tom Giacabetti's bedside and tuned the radio to WRTI (90.1 FM). "We'd like to take a minute to honor one of Philadelphia's finest and most beloved jazz guitarists," said the familiar voice of DJ Bob Perkins as he introduced "Caitlin's Lullaby," a solo piece that Giacabetti wrote and recorded in dedication to his daughter. Perkins closed by offering "prayers and good thoughts for Tom's speedy recovery."

While it was too late to hope for any such recovery — Giacabetti passed away two days later at 64, following a prolonged illness — the broadcast arrived just in time, allowing the lifelong musician to hear one of his own songs played over the airwaves for the first time. Singer Paul Jost, a longtime friend and collaborator of Giacabetti's, recalled the moment warmly. "I hope when my time comes I'm surrounded by family, hearing sweet music and feeling the love of the people around me."

"Caitlin's Lullaby" is one of 14 tracks on *Tender Heart: Songs of Tom Giacabetti and Melissa Gilstrap*, Giacabetti's posthumously released debut CD, all but two of them original music. Though he'd been a successful professional musician for more than 40 years, playing in Atlantic City casinos and Philadelphia theaters while teaching at Temple, UArts, Rowan University and Bucks County Community College, he'd turned his focus to composition late in life. "I always felt I had nothing to say," he writes in the liner notes for the new album, which features vocals by a host of singers including Jost, Denise King, Joanna Pascale and Sharon Sable.

The expressive, aching melodic music on *Tender Heart* offers a strong argument against the composer's own contention, but perhaps to ensure that his songs did in fact convey a message, Giacabetti turned to lyricist Melissa Gilstrap to add words to many of them. Though the two had never met, Giacabetti knew of Gilstrap from her collaborations with saxophonist Larry McKenna.

“I didn’t know Tom at all, but he told me he was gravely ill and he wanted to make this CD as his legacy,” Gilstrap recalls. “It was very heavy, but it was also a great privilege and honor to have somebody come to you as a stranger and trust you like that.”

A corporate lawyer by day, Gilstrap has held lifelong passions for art and music, which converge in the portraits she’s drawn of musicians during live shows for more than 20 years (one of which graces the cover of *Tender Heart*). It was through her sketches that Gilstrap met McKenna and, loving his ballad playing, encouraged him to pen a ballad of his own. He complied on the condition that she contribute lyrics, something she’d never tried before.

The result, “Perhaps This Wintertime,” appeared on McKenna’s album *Profiles* and was later recorded by the Hot Club of Philadelphia with Denise King, and by Mary Ellen Desmond. Gilstrap reunited with McKenna as lyricist and coproducer for his latest album, *From All Sides*.

Gilstrap served as producer on *Tender Heart* as well as lyricist, and after Giacabetti’s passing, she became the driving force behind completing the album — designing, packaging, distributing and marketing it herself. She also makes her vocal debut on the album, duetting with Jost on Antonio Carlos Jobim’s “Batidinha.”

“That was an eye-opener,” Gilstrap says of singing for the first time. “I didn’t know I could do that, but Tom was super-encouraging. I couldn’t have done it without him being so supportive, and I think that’s how he was with his students. He gave you the feeling that he believed in you and that you could stretch and try something new.”

Having worked with Giacabetti for many years in Atlantic City and elsewhere, Jost remembers him as a consummate musician and flawless sight reader, a crucial talent for someone playing in a variety of ensembles and pit orchestras. “If there was a mistake, it was in the chart,” Jost says. “He was magical, one of my favorite guitarists and musicians and just a great guy. I always felt the heart in his playing.”

Philly audiences have obviously responded to that heart, voting Giacabetti and Gilstrap’s “Fantasy of You and Me in Love,” with vocals by Pascale, into the top spot on WRTI’s Hot 11 countdown for the last three weeks. It’s a bittersweet success given the fact that the artist himself didn’t live to see it, but Gilstrap feels he was fulfilled simply by the act of recording.

“At one point I asked him what his favorite part of the process was, and he said recording in the studio with people,” she says. “I think it was a dream come true for him.”

Preview Tom Giacabetti’s *Tender Heart: Songs of Tom Giacabetti and Melissa Gilstrap* at tomgiacabetti.com.