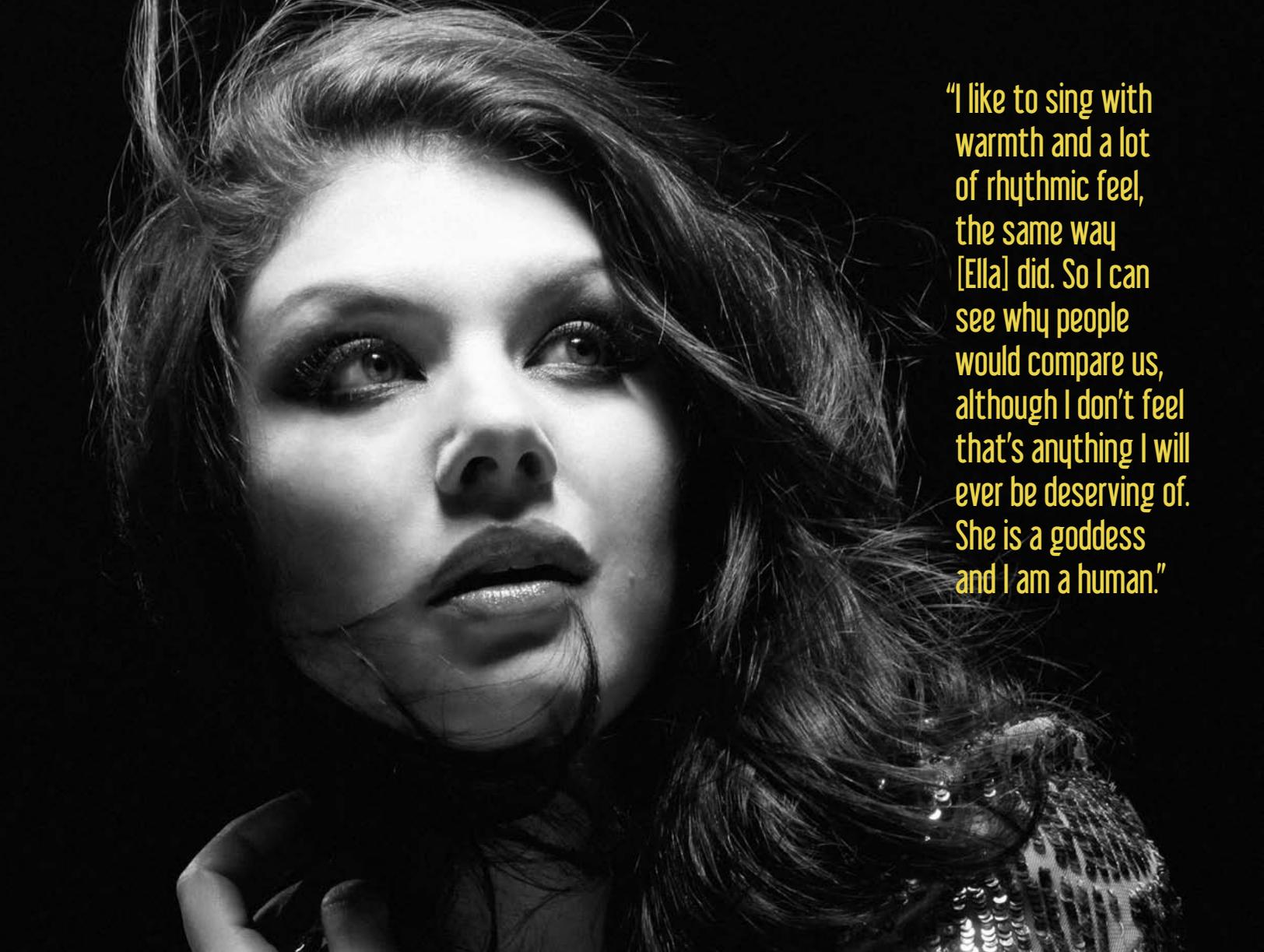




Jane's Way

With a new album and label to her name,
Jane Monheit has taken full control
of her music and image.

By Ted Panken
Photos by Timothy Saccenti



“I like to sing with warmth and a lot of rhythmic feel, the same way [Ella] did. So I can see why people would compare us, although I don’t feel that’s anything I will ever be deserving of. She is a goddess and I am a human.”

Jane Monheit’s 10th CD, *The Songbook Sessions: Ella Fitzgerald [Emerald City]*, brings with it two surprises. One is that it took Monheit so long to focus explicitly on the singer she describes as her “ultimate hero.” The other is her decision to collaborate with Nicholas Payton, and give him free rein to tweak the good old good ones that have been Monheit’s meat and potatoes during 17 years in the international spotlight.

The project originated in 2012, when Monheit concluded her contractual obligation to EmArcy with *The Heart of the Matter*, a reflective recital on which, supported by Gil Goldstein-arranged cellos and flutes, she sang repertoire by, among others, Lennon and McCartney, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Randy Newman, Ivan Lins and Hoagy Carmichael.

Being in no rush to sign with another label, she soon assembled and toured what she calls “a jazz side of Judy Garland” show. Last spring she started another project, celebrating male artists — Lins and Stevie Wonder, among them — who have most influenced her. Then she reconsidered.

“I wasn’t feeling it,” Monheit says on a mild mid-March afternoon while drinking tea at a restaurant near the Upper West

Side apartment she shares with drummer Rick Montalbano, who is her husband, and their 7-year-old son. Her hair is pulled back, and she wears minimal makeup, flat shoes, black jeans and a gray cardigan over a white T-shirt. “I told my manager it was finally time for me to do Ella. A lot of people have associated me to her, I think, just because I’ve talked about her non-stop since I started to do interviews when I was 20.”

Monheit wasn’t fishing for a compliment, but it was impossible not to observe that her luminous instrument might also be a factor. “We sing in an almost identical range,” she responds, launching into a spot-on self-description of her talents, delivered without false modesty. “I’ve absorbed a lot of her musical sensibilities, because as a kid I studied her records non-stop. I like to sing with warmth and a lot of rhythmic feel, the same way she did. So I can see why people would compare us, although I don’t feel that’s anything I will ever be deserving of. She is a goddess and I am a human.”

After settling on the Ella project, Monheit decided to move on from an eight-year relationship with her manager, Cynthia Herbst, and to sign with Anna Sala, whose clients include Ravi Coltrane and Payton. “We parted amicably, but we’d reached the

end of what we could do together,” Monheit says. “I’m very big on changes in my life. I always tend to jump at them. I never like things to stay the same for too long.”

Sala herself called Payton, who had spent time with Monheit when their bands crossed paths in São Paulo a few years earlier, to ask his opinion on whether she would be a good fit. “I told Anna she’s a cool person, and that her instrument — her tone, her clarity — is tops,” Payton says by phone from his New Orleans home. “She does extremely difficult things with ease. To me, that reflects a very disciplined person who has spent much time in the woodshed. I could tell she’d worked hard with her gift to get where she is.”

With Sala’s help, Monheit formed a new imprint, Emerald City Records, on which to release the project. Funding came from Monheit’s father, who owns a tool manufacturing company, is a bluegrass aficionado and, by her account, an excellent banjo player. Then Sala asked Payton to consider coming onboard as producer.

“Ella is one of my favorites, and I love reworking standard material while remaining true to the song itself,” Payton says. “Having a vocalist with Jane’s dynamics, voice, range and lyricism singing these tunes was a great opportunity to get into that. But it’s a fine line. As a producer, my job is to make her comfortable, and I want to facilitate her vision; but my job was also to make her uncomfortable, to challenge her and push her in some areas she otherwise might not go. All she said was, ‘I’m cool with you taking chances, but don’t go too crazy.’”

Payton laughs. “I don’t think I really listened to that.”

Roughly speaking, *The Songbook Sessions* frames Monheit in two contexts. On several of the album’s dozen tracks, she hews to terms of engagement followed by such role models as Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae, as she did on nine prior CDs that established her idiomatic mastery of jazz, pop, Brazilian and cabaret styles. On others, Payton recalibrates the rhythmic and sonic flow to a contemporary context. Each piece refers in some way to Fitzgerald’s original recording of it.

“I am very much a stickler for melodic and lyrical integrity, and Jane and I both were on the same page with that,” says Payton, who delivers a series of trumpet solos that embody that principle. “You can change the setting, the chords or the rhythm, but if you mess with the melody or the lyrics, then it’s no longer the same song. You might as well write an original composition.”

Consider how the collaborators treat Duke Ellington’s “All Too Soon,” which Fitzgerald recorded with the Ellington Orchestra in 1957 and in duo with guitarist Joe Pass in 1976. Monheit previously recorded it in on her 2010 CD *Home*, which she produced. On that track, propelled by Montalbano’s unwavering slow-drag on brushes, she begins by singing Ellington’s blue ballad “I Didn’t Know About You” in fluid, horn-like cadences; around 2:10, the key shifts, and “All Too Soon” begins with violinist Mark O’Connor’s soaring solo, paralleling Ray Nance’s role on the 1967 live double-album *Ella and Duke at the Côte D’Azur* (on which Fitzgerald laid out). Guitarist Frank Vignola acknowledges Pass’ two-chorus solo from 1976, O’Connor plays a coda, then Monheit unleashes a tour de force improvisation,

imprinting her personality on Carl Sigman’s bittersweet lyric.

That *The Songbook Sessions* version of “All Too Soon” is from 2015 is immediately evident when Michael Kanan opens with a skronky melody statement on Fender Rhodes as Daniel Sadownick sets up a rumba, striking a conga drum with his left hand and sticking a cowbell with his right. Thirty seconds in, Monheit sings the opening stanza within the rhythm. Montalbano thwacks the ride cymbal, triggering a *danzon*-like flow to which she adjusts. Payton uncorks two clarion choruses, Monheit returns, sings the climactic lines, and concludes with an informed vocalese passage, accompanying herself with an overdubbed three-part harmony chant.

On “I’ve Got You Under My Skin,” Payton sets up funky beats that underpin trumpet long tones and distorted Fender textures against Monheit’s breathy, erotic reading, before she transitions to wordless vocals and a *fortissimo* conclusion. On Gershwin’s “I Was Doing All Right,” Kanan’s keyboard and Brandee Younger’s harp complement Monheit’s extended rubato verse statement. The flow turns Brazilian, and she phrases counter-rhythmically to the beat. After Payton’s soulful solo, Kanan and Younger spin out whirling passages that frame Monheit’s concluding segue into Amy Winehouse’s “Know You Know.” On “Chelsea Mood,” Monheit references the Fitzgerald-Ellington treatment with a wordless vocal on the melody of “Chelsea Bridge,” but adds her own touch, intertwining her voice seamlessly with Payton’s testifying counter-line, before transitioning to the lyric of “In a Sentimental Mood,” then reestablishing the voice-trumpet dialogue at the end.

“I had that idea for a while,” Monheit says of the latter piece. “I often work with a lot of back-story and visual imagery on ballads, though not usually so much with the swingers. ‘Chelsea Bridge’ is the present and it turns into a memory, which is ‘Sentimental Mood.’ I sang it in a very high key, which is unusual for a jazz vocalist, because I wanted it to sound innocent, almost virginal, like someone’s first experience with love, before I return to ‘Chelsea Bridge,’ the present.”

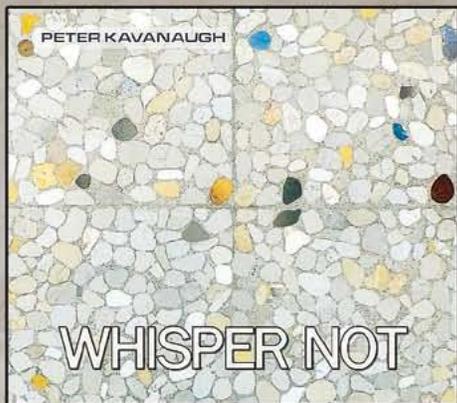
Then Monheit described her interpretation of Harold Arlen’s “Ill Wind,” on which Payton’s onomatopoeic sighs, complemented by Neal Miner’s arco bass, posit a turbulent, threnodic environment for her tormented reading. “I pictured a woman out on her porch, it’s late at night, storm’s picking up,” Monheit says. “The children are safe in bed, asleep and fed, but she didn’t eat so she could feed the kids. And there’s a man, maybe the kids’ father, maybe not, who is out there, and she knows he’s going to find her, but she doesn’t know when he’s going to show up.”

She adds: “I think about this stuff probably because I come from theater, and it’s fun for me to do this to myself. I’m a lunatic. But I was singing a lot about my own life at that time, too. I mean, I was in hell when I made this record.”

For one thing, Monheit was in the throes of bronchitis during the five days of sessions. “I get sick a lot,” she acknowledges. “I’m a mom of a little boy; if I wasn’t getting sick a lot, I’d be doing something wrong. I have a cold right now. My nails are a mess.”

She was also grieving at the time, partly because “my dog was in the hospital and supposedly dying,” but, more consequentially, because her 94-year-old grandfather had recently died. “He had a house full of instruments and could play them, and he taught me everything I know about this music,” she says. “I

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Notes From the Old School

Although not yet 40, Jane Monheit is old-school to the core. "I guess I sound like me," she says of her performance on *The Songbook Sessions*. "That's all I could want to sound like. There's no Auto-Tune, no studio magic. We didn't do any of that crap. I don't believe in it."

Monheit walked that walk on contemporary-jazz pianist David Benoit's 2015 albums *2 In Love* and *Believe*. "We made those records in four days or something like that, and I sight-read everything," she says. "Everybody was surprised that I was reading the charts and singing in tune. Of course I am. I'm just doing my job. If you know people who aren't doing that, they've got a problem. I remember seeing one of the clubs here in New York advertising a jam session on social media once, and they said, 'Singers and musicians welcome.' I was like, 'That is problematic to me.'"



Monheit and Nicholas Payton

Also problematic to Monheit are singers who are, as she puts it, "affected and stylized." "I want them to drop that bag of tricks, so I can know what they really sound like," she says. "I do a lot of teaching, and I'm always trying to get my students to the honesty. I'd rather hear something terribly flawed that tells the truth to something perfect and slick and gorgeous." She applies that aesthetic philosophy to her own musical production. "I have not written most of the songs I sing. What reason would I have to sing them if I weren't trying to deliver some kind of message, tell some kind of truth, tell some kind of story? There has to be sincerity, and my favorite singers are the ones who naturally have that sincerity."

It also rankles Monheit that jazz Millennials pay insufficient dues. "There's a real sense of entitlement," she says. "The musicians of my generation, in their 40s and late 30s, we all played a thousand gigs and got told how it was by the older musicians. When I was in school, I played all over the city with a lot of older guys who are still friends and people I play with now. I made the hang at jam sessions, sitting in whenever I could. I was never going to be the broad singing warm-ups with a scarf on, sitting with the singers and sipping tea. That would have been better behavior for a vocalist than sitting in Smalls until 6 in the morning. But I learned a lot, which was invaluable." —TP

spent half my childhood sitting on the living room floor with him, listening to records, singing duets."

In the vicinity of that loss, Monheit, four months pregnant, suffered a miscarriage. "I lost a little boy, and it was devastating," she says. "I was very much dealing with that when I was making the record, and still am. When I was singing 'Ill Wind' and 'Every Time We Say Goodbye' (the latter is a keening duo with Kanan), that's what I was singing about. I'm ready to talk about it because I did a lot of shows visibly pregnant, and spoke to audiences about it. I know a

lot of women who have experienced loss in terms of having babies or incredibly difficult fertility struggles. But we don't talk about this. Women are very 'We need to keep our secrets.' I think it's ridiculous."

Perhaps the convergence of events that Monheit describes triggered her willingness to break with the paradigm that has served her so well. "It touched me that Jane let me go in those spaces, and didn't push back, but went for it," Payton says. "I don't know too many musicians, let alone vocalists, who could

rise to the occasion and do it like that, on the fly, on the spot. Add to that all she was going through, and what she did was incredible.”

Four years Monheit’s senior, Payton — who struggled for years to overcome the “traditionalist” label because of his early-career success playing Louis Armstrong’s music — could also empathize with her determination to define her own path. “I think she was presented in this sex kitten way,” he says, referencing the Rapunzel hairstyle and form-fitting gowns that became synonymous with Monheit’s public persona during her 20s. “She wasn’t really looked at for being able to stand flat-footed onstage and sing her ass off. When a record label is trying to push you in a certain way, it can create frustration, because people are not really seeing you.”

Monheit implies that these frustrations spurred her to exercise more control over her career. “I didn’t like being told what to do. I didn’t like being treated differently because I’m female. I didn’t like fighting with everyone over the ridiculous amount of Photoshop everyone was using on me, and trying to change the way I looked and the way I sing, and trying to market me as something I wasn’t. The whole thing was: Enough! I am 38 years old. I’m a grown woman and a mother, and I don’t need anybody to tell me what to do any more, for better or for worse.”

For *The Songbook Sessions*, Monheit styled her own hair and makeup and wore her own clothing and jewelry for the cover and publicity photographs, using Photoshop only “to smooth some stray hairs sticking out of my head.” “I’ve always been a confident woman, which I think people can tell by the way I carry myself onstage and in life. I enjoy being glamorous and a sexy person and

all of that. This for me is glamour on my terms. If someone sees my show, they get this girl whose hair looks like this and whose makeup looks like this. I’m really healthy, and I’m well-appreciated by the male gender. But I have a severe thyroid issue; I’m never going to be thin.

“I’ve been at photo shoots where they put these jelly-silicone things called cutlets in my bra to make my breasts look bigger. I’ve had people scream at me to suck in my stomach. I once did a shoot in Germany where I knew enough German to understand that the people standing around were talking about how fat I was and what were they going to do about it. I was just like, ‘Fuck off.’ For real. I can’t have that in my life anymore. I don’t need society to tell me what I’m supposed to be. Anyway, nothing is as important as being a parent. Whether or not I look fat in some dress matters way less than what my son had for dinner before I went onstage.”

Having said her piece about taking charge of her life and artistic expression, Monheit hints that she intends, for the time being, to subsume the presentation of her diverse interests in favor of her roots in jazz and the American Songbook. “That music is a big part of who I am,” she says. “I feel strongly about carrying a torch and singing songs that would have made my grandfather happy. But I’d be just as happy doing an album of all musical theater, totally belting Sondheim, or singing folk music. Live, I sneak in things when I feel like it, and I do sideman work for different projects. If I did everything I wanted, I’d just confuse everyone.

“Still, musical options always seem to stay open. I couldn’t live in a world where I didn’t have musical options. I’d be miserable.” ●



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