

[PR] Retro jazz vocalist Laura Ainsworth talks about the past, present and future

PJ Portrait in Jazz, November 18, 2019
Interview conducted by Hiroki Sugita

Dallas, Texas based female vocalist Laura Ainsworth debuted with the release of her first album in 2011. She talks about her childhood, her days working at a commercial music production company, her present activities as a professional vocalist, and her future plans.

1. Dallas is your hometown. If Dallas has any specialties relating to music, what would they be?

LA: That is such a wonderful question; I don't think anyone has ever asked me that before. Dallas has many industries, but one of them is commercial recording, which means the jingles and commercial music you hear on TV and radio stations. I grew up in the "jingle business," as my father (Billy Ainsworth) played sax and clarinet in many commercials, and was also the leader of a top jingle singing group. After college, I went to work at a commercial production house called TM Productions, writing commercial jingles. I made many longtime musician friends there, and even met my husband there.

The commercial recording business is what originally brought my parents from Los Angeles to Dallas to raise their family. My father would work evenings as a member of a society orchestra, playing behind legendary singers such as Tony Bennett, Mel Tormé, and others from the swing era who were still performing. They performed at an upscale, old-style supper club. On Tuesdays, there was no cover charge for the band members' families, so my mom would take me to performances on these nights. You can tell that it made quite an impression on me.

I should also mention that Dallas is near the town of Denton, Texas. Denton is home to the University of North Texas, which has one of the first and best jazz education programs in the world. The university's One O'Clock Lab Band has seven Grammy nominations. Most of my core band members are, or have been, professors of jazz in the university's jazz program.

2. Please tell us about your experience playing musical instruments.

LA: I grew up in a very musical family. My father was a child prodigy who could play virtually any wind instrument brilliantly. Playing piano also runs in my family, as my grandmother, when she was still in her teens, was a pianist in an all-female ragtime band. As for myself, I'm self-taught on piano and reading music, and I used to accompany my high school choir on piano. But today when I perform, I work with such incredible professional players that I prefer to concentrate on what I do best, which is singing.

3. You worked at TM Productions as a jingle songwriter. How did you develop your skills as a songwriter and composer?

LA: What I did most was write lyrics to existing music tracks. There might be music for a sixty-second “spot” (commercial), and I would write original lyrics for a restaurant chain, a department store, or just about any type of business that advertises on the radio or TV. This would involve creating a slogan line, and then what they called a “full sing” for sixty seconds. I wrote literally hundreds and hundreds of these, entire “libraries” of them.

That experience is probably why, when I write song lyrics today, I like to start with a melody. I’ll come up with an idea for a song, and then maybe a few lines, but then I will have the composer to go away for a while until he has a tune he’d like me to work on. My first original song to make it to one of my CDs, “The Man I Love Is Gone,” was written in this way.

I also love to write humorous parodies of well-known songs, and have done many of these for North American radio shows. I even created a one-woman live theatrical show entitled *My Ship Has Sailed* that was full of funny song parodies.

As much as I love writing songs, though, it’s just as important to me to rediscover wonderful forgotten songs. With there being so many existing songs out there, well, I could write an original song, or I could record a song that no one has heard since Annette Hanshaw recorded it in 1934. There are many times that I will come across an obscure old song, and think, “I *have* to sing that!” And that is exactly what I will do.

4. You had a professional career as an actress. Has your professional acting career had a positive influence on your current vocal jazz activity?

LA: My background in acting has absolutely made me a better singer. It’s been said that one thing that makes Frank Sinatra a great singer is that he is also a great actor. I think good singing is about conveying the emotion of the lyric, not just showing off your singing abilities. I typically approach a song very much like a theatrical monologue; the thought and preparation are very much the same.

5. Is Eclectus Records, the label that released your debut album *Keep It to Yourself*, your company?

LA: Yes, Eclectus Records is a personal imprint, owned by myself and my husband and producer Pat Reeder. Fortunately, technology and other resources have made it easier for independent artists to press, distribute and promote their own music. However, it can still be costly to launch a recording artist, and that is a key reason why I waited to start until I could create some very high-quality recording projects. I don’t want to put out anything that isn’t the best I can offer. I wanted my albums — even the packaging — to compare favorably with those glorious albums brought out in the 1950s by major labels such as Capitol and Verve. I waited until I had just the right producer, players, studio and engineer, and I think we just keep getting better together.

6. Why do you think *Keep It to Yourself* is highly praised?

LA: *Keep It to Yourself* was intended to set the stage for what I do and what I think makes me unique. I didn't feel like other current American jazz singers stood out in the same way, with comparable glamour, wit, and high quality material that singing stars from the 1940s and 1950s had. For this reason, we put a great deal of thought and research into song choices, types of arrangements, and artistic presentation. As I mentioned, I waited until I thought I could do it right, and that turned out to be a wise move.

7. The song "Out Of This World," from the second album *Necessary Evil*, was included in two popular compilations in India, and led you to do a concert tour of India. Please tell us the reason why this song was featured, and the inside story about the tour in India.

LA: I was invited to submit a track to a compilation series entitled *Chill-Out Zone*. I felt that "Out Of This World" had a calming, ethereal atmosphere and international sensibility that would be right for the series.

As for the India tour, I was there in January, and the weather was 32° Celsius, which is much warmer than Dallas is in January. The best concert was on a stage located right on the beach. I was surprised that certain areas of India have a strong jazz scene. In Goa, a city on the western coast of India, there are some terrific jazz bands, such as the one that was my backup group. They are comprised of both Indian players and British and European musicians who have either moved there or spend their winters there.

I also spent some time in Bangalore, and did a little recording with my friend Ricky Kej, a well-known Indian musician. He explained to me some of the intricacies of traditional music there and the level of study that is required to be able to create it. Thanks to his hospitality, we were able to take a few days and see the sights as well.

8. "The Man I Love Is Gone" from *New Vintage* is the only original (self-composed) song on your albums. Tell us about the lyrics and what inspired you to write the song.

LA: A very talented guitarist friend of mine, George Gagliardi, and I had been wanting to write a song together. So I got an idea: "There is a woman living with a man who has withdrawn from her emotionally. He is there physically, but he's not really *there*." At the time, I was a big fan of the show *Mad Men*, and the character of Betty felt that way about her wayward husband Don. So that is what inspired the song. I gave George the first four lines:

*"Didn't pack his suitcase
Didn't say 'so long,'
Didn't wave and drive away
But the man I love is gone."*

I then told George to make the song kind of bluesy, and then let him get to work. He wrote me a tune that I really liked, and then I wrote the rest of the lyrics. Later on, a friend of mine, who went through years of marriage with an emotionally distant spouse and finally divorced, told me that the song portrayed that situation perfectly.

9. Concerning *Top Shelf*: It is our opinion that it was a little early to produce a “best-of” album as the fourth LP after the release of three original studio albums. Why did you choose to release this album when you did?

LA: *Top Shelf* was released specifically for the vinyl market, which as you know is having a big resurgence in the West (North America and Europe). My studio albums are currently available only on CD and download, and we thought that a compilation would be the best way to introduce my music to vinyl buyers. I also thought that with the type of music I do, it just *should* be on vinyl! The artists who inspired me created music that was played on a turntable; that was part of the experience. I’m really glad we did it now, because it seems to be taking on a life of its own, particularly in Japan.

We’re also realizing that having a compilation on CD will provide Japanese jazz fans with an easy entry point for my music. So with this in mind, we have a CD edition of *Top Shelf* produced and ready to release to the Japanese market.

10. Tell us more about this CD edition of *Top Shelf*.

LA: The CD edition will have new liner notes, and a reworked and extended track list with a very fluid sequential order. Both the liner notes and the new track list were created by my Japanese representative David Gasten, who is known in America for having produced the compilation album series *This is Vintage Now*. This CD edition of *Top Shelf* will also feature an unreleased track, a version of Irving Berlin’s “You’d Be Surprised” that I recorded during the *Necessary Evil* sessions, but wasn’t able to place on an album until now.

We sent a preview copy of this CD edition of *Top Shelf* to a well-known jazz producer who has produced numerous jazz albums and reissues for the Japanese market. His response made me very happy: he called it “the perfect album.” That said, we want Japanese jazz fans who buy the album to judge this for themselves.

11. What were your criteria for the selection of the songs that would be included on the *Top Shelf* LP?

LA: Narrowing the playlist was indeed difficult! It was a bit like a jigsaw puzzle. I started with longer tracks that I *knew* I had to find room for, such as “Love for Sale,” “Necessary Evil” and “Out of This World,” and worked from there. I also wanted a variety of styles and tempos. For instance, “An Occasional Man” had to be there because it’s so much fun, and because I intend to record more music in the exotica genre in the future. I had to leave off several favorites because they are too long, such as “My Foolish Heart” and “Midnight Sun.”

Other people may have different favorites, but this is a selection that I think represents me well. The CD edition has a larger track list, so some of your favorites might be on that edition of the album instead.

12. You have been collaborating with Brian Piper since your debut album. Why have you chosen to work with Brian as your pianist and producer?

LA: Brian and I had actually been collaborating previously. He was my music director and keyboardist for *My Ship Has Sailed*, the theatrical comedy and song parody show that I mentioned earlier. By the time I was ready to record my first CD, Brian was already one of the most in-demand producers and keyboard players in all of Texas. We've known each other for a long time; in fact, both of his parents worked with my dad. Brian's dad was a composer/arranger at TM Productions, and his mom was a jingle singer. Brian knows exactly what I am going for with my sound. I bring him obscure old songs and crazy ideas for new arrangements, and he helps make them a reality. I feel that if people consider my music to be "a cut above", Brian is the key reason for it.

13. *Top Shelf* was your introduction to Japanese listeners. Please tell us about your plans for your next original album.

LA: My next project will most likely be an album of audience requests. The title will be *You Asked for It*. A lot of people want to hear me sing certain songs, and I tend to get asked for these same songs over and over. For example, "Cry Me A River," first recorded by Julie London, is one I get asked to sing a lot. Some of these songs have been recorded by many artists, so I haven't been in a hurry to record them. But since people want to hear me do these songs, then I will bring something new to the table or approach them in a different way, just as I have done with the songs on my previous studio albums.

14. Please tell us about your future plans.

LA: I also have a separate idea for an album that covers the concept of time travel, and have been slowly assembling a wonderful set of songs that work within that theme, including, of course, some very obscure ones. But my biggest hope right now is to tour in Japan and create a *Live in Japan* album. Until a few years ago, that would have seemed like a crazy dream. But I've had some crazy dreams come true lately, so it seems entirely possible now.

Media Contact: David Gasten, Swing City Productions

6129 Fountain Ave No. 5, Los Angeles, CA 90028 USA (+1) 323-499-1805 swingcityproductions@gmail.com