

Masterpieces From the Good Old Days sung by

# Laura Ainsworth

Interview by Kiyotaka Hirai

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Good news for retro jazz fans! Laura Ainsworth's compilation album *Top Shelf* will be released on September 15th from Ratspack Records as her first Japanese CD, which was originally released with an LP in 2020 (in Japan) and is a collection of selected songs from her past albums by herself. This is a kami jacket CD that resembles the LP, mastering has been improved while retaining the original warm sound. We are featuring Laura again, same as the interview with her in *Vol. 215* (May 2020) and having her talk more about the *Top Shelf* CD.

1. In the last interview (*Jazz Critique Vol. 215*), after you talked about your musical background, you said, "I honestly felt as

though I had been born in the wrong era." To us as listeners, we got a feeling that we were very lucky to be able to hear classic jazz recorded with the latest cutting-edge technology, and we would like to say to you, "Thank you for being born in the wrong era".

**Is there any reason other than your childhood environment that you chose the classic style?**

You are most welcome, and thank you! I'm sure there are many benefits to having been born in the current era, but they have nothing to do with music. The music was definitely better in days gone by, and

certainly more suited to my personality. I think that in general, the lifestyle was, too. Definitely the clothes, the architectural style, the interior design. I'm happy to see a lot of that coming back.

It's hard to say what my taste would have been had I grown up without exposure to my father's music. (My dad, Bill Ainsworth, was a renowned big band musician and arranger.) But I really do think I would have found it all by myself. How could I not? Certainly, there are many people I know who have found it on their own and didn't get to grow up with it as I did. There's an expression here in Texas: "I'm not a native Texan, but I got here as soon as I could." I think of music and culture the same way.

Another reason I gravitated to this style is that my natural voice just fits it. I don't sing like modern-day pop or jazz singers. I suppose I could try to copy them and use the same kind of production they do, but I just want to sound like myself. I don't even want to copy anyone from the '40s or '50s, just be myself as an individual, as the music stars from those days were. I miss the era of distinctive voices. So this is just my voice, with very little production, no AutoTune, just expertly recorded, the same as for those artists who recorded for Verve and Capitol back in the day.

**2. The *Top Shelf* CD is an album that is compiled with the songs from your past three albums. It has gorgeous songs sung with a big band, and songs that feel as if they were performed with a mini combo at a jazz club. It can be called a "Laura Ainsworth showcase." How do you determine your repertoire?**

2. It was my second CD, NECESSARY EVIL, that had the real "big band" sound. We brought in 13 horns to play in the same room all at once, something rarely done these days. The musicians loved this because it's what used to happen in the old days; they were taking selfies and having a great time. Some of them had worked with my dad and had plenty of stories about him to tell me. So the "big band" tracks on TOP SHELF are from that CD.

But then I wanted to blend those bigger tracks with more spare, reflective songs, such as "Love For Sale" from my first CD, KEEP IT TO YOURSELF. The more recording I do, the more I'm drawn to those more subtle, dreamy songs, like "Skylark," "Midnight Sun" and "Out Of This World." And I'm definitely getting more into exotica with songs like "An Occasional Man," just because it's so much fun! (Not to mention I actually live in a tiki-style 1950s house with thirteen tropical birds.) I've recorded with a big band, a small group and even a single instrument, depending on the mood of each song.

**3. In addition to the tracks on the LP version released in 2017, six more tracks have been added to the CD version. Please tell us about the added tracks [i.e. "The**

**Gentleman Is A Dope," "You'd Be Surprised," "Medley: Long Ago And Far Away / You Stepped Out Of A Dream," "Personality," "My Foolish Heart," "Dream A Little Dream Of Me"]].**

As much as I love vinyl, the downside is that the space is limited. I had hoped to be able to include these tracks on the vinyl TOP SHELF but just didn't have room. On the CD, though, I can include whatever I want.

"My Foolish Heart" is a song I've enjoyed singing live for years and was one of the first I ever recorded – so very romantic. "Personality" has the most wonderful lyrics by Johnny Mercer, and I also sing the verse, which most people have never heard. (I try to include obscure verses whenever possible!) "Dream A Little Dream Of Me" is just a sweet little song I've always loved, with a beautiful clarinet solo by Chris McGuire, who I think sounds a lot like my father did. He idolizes my dad, who mentored him when he was starting out.

I also include a medley of "Long Ago And Far Away" and "You Stepped Out Of A Dream." These songs just seem to go together, lyrically and melodically, don't you think? "Long Ago and Far Away" was introduced in the 1944 movie COVER GIRL by Rita Hayworth – my favorite Hollywood goddess, another redhead like me – although that isn't her voice in the film. (It was beautifully dubbed by Martha Mears.) Jerome Kern wrote the music; Ira Gershwin wrote the lyrics. I became fond of "You Stepped Out Of A Dream" because my father used to play the Brasil '66 version, from their album CRYSTAL ILLUSIONS, when I was a child. I think he must have played it thousands of times, and I never got tired of it. Obviously, I still love it!

**The CD version includes "You'd Be Surprised," which has been unreleased until now. How did you find such a song that few people sing these days?**

"You'd Be Surprised," written by Irving Berlin, was not recorded as part of any larger project; it was just something I wanted to do. My producer and brilliant keyboard player, Brian Piper, played piano, John Adams played bass, and we just did it straight through. I've always thought this song was hilarious, and I do not shy away from comedy. Eddie Cantor first recorded it in 1919. Much later, the great Madeleine Kahn performed it in 1988 as part of Berlin's 100th birthday celebration. So I did it not just as a tribute to Irving Berlin, but also to Madeleine Kahn, who was a huge inspiration to me. I love that she could be hysterically funny but also had a beautiful singing voice.

As for where I find so many great, obscure songs that have not been recorded for decades, I not only know them from my father and his friends, but I am lucky to be surrounded by record collectors and music historians, including my husband and many of our friends. One runs a marvelous online radio station called Radio Dismuke that plays 78s from the 1920s and '30s. I've found a few rare gems there.

**Please tell us about the plans for your new album [i.e. *You Asked For It*].**

I decided to record YOU ASKED FOR IT because even though I “specialize” in finding and re-introducing obscure songs from days gone by, many people still request the old standards that are more familiar. And I love them, too. So these are beautiful standards that most people will immediately recognize, such as “Someone To Watch Over Me,” “As Time Goes By” and “Our Love Is Here To Stay.” Even so, I’m trying to give them my personal touch, like including verses that even lovers of standards will probably not have heard before.

**Is there anything you would like to say to your Japanese fans?**

To my Japanese fans: I appreciate your interest more than I can say! When I first started singing, and even later, when I was recording albums, I never dreamed that I would be heard by an audience so far away, at least geographically. But as far apart as we are on the map, we are very close when it comes to the music we love. I’m thrilled and honored that you enjoy my music, and I hope that once the world is fully back to normal, I can visit your beautiful country in person. Thank you so much for listening to me, and for helping keep this wonderful music alive.