

Laura Ainsworth interview

Jazz Japan Vol. 111 (Oct. 24, 2019), p. 70-71

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Laura Ainsworth is a Dallas-based retro jazz vocalist. The vivacious red-haired jazz diva recently released a best-of album entitled "Top Shelf" on vinyl LP. She revives classic songs from the 1920s-1950's that are full of nostalgia, with accompaniment provided primarily by a large big band. Laura's style, described as "New Vintage," sounds fresh and yet nostalgic all at once, and her origins can be traced back to the time of her father Billy Ainsworth, who was a sax and a clarinet player.

As a girl, Laura grew up watching her father perform with Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, and Mel Tormé. She dreamt of becoming a jazz singer, and over time, she would eventually decide to become a jazz icon. Since her debut in 2011, she has become better known and her following has been growing steadily, and finally her long-sought dream of producing a vinyl album has come true. We asked Laura about her childhood memories, her unique career so far, her thoughts about the compilation LP "Top Shelf", and her future plans.

Could you tell us about the main concept behind TOP SHELF?

In America, when you go to a swanky nightclub, the very best bottles of liquor are kept on the “top shelf.” A “top shelf martini” would be made with only the finest and most prized brand name liquors. Likewise, this album contains a selection of what I consider to be some of my finest work. TOP SHELF is my first venture into vinyl, and I’m very excited about that—it is a lifelong dream come true. My style of music was popular back in the days when people played vinyl records on turntables, so hearing my music on vinyl seems to contribute to the “total experience.”

Your music is referred to as “retro jazz”. How did you manage to nurture your original style?

Because of my jazz musician father, I had a lot of opportunities to see Ella, Sinatra, Tony Bennett,

Peggy Lee, Julie London, and many more up close, and I have studied and learned from all of them. Outside of this, he recorded radio jingles, and sometimes he would take me to the studio to watch. He was known as “The Judge” in the jingle industry for his perfectionism, so I learned to sing with a very pure but distinctive sound. I started to blossom as a singer when I was doing musical theater in high school. It was then that I really started thinking, “I can do this.” I was also very fortunate to find a great voice teacher. Vocalizing correctly is important, and I'm still improving as a vocalist with time.

You are also a writer and an actress when you are not singing. How do these [singing and writing/acting] affect each other when you are working as both?

Singing is similar to storytelling, and acting plays a big role in that. A song to me is sort of a dramatic monologue, and it has to be honest. Fake emotion is like bad acting. Frank Sinatra is the perfect example of a singer who is also a great actor, and who utilized acting to express genuine, honest emotion in a song.

I have written a number of songs in the Great American Songbook style, and I hope to record more of them. So far, I have only recorded one of my own songs, and that is “The Man I Love Is Gone” from my third album.

You have toured India and Dubai. Are you planning to visit Japan in the near future?

I did not know what I was missing until I started touring and seeing other parts of the world; it really opened my eyes. I'm very impressed with Japan's jazz scene. Japanese jazz artists seem to appreciate classic jazz better than many Americans do. It would be a dream come true to create a “Live In Japan” album specifically for the Japanese market.

We are currently working on creating a CD edition of TOP SHELF, and on securing a Japanese record deal. The Japanese CD edition will feature an unreleased track, which is a version of Irving Berlin's “You'd Be Surprised”. Plus, we have plans to reissue my three studio albums, and are also preparing two brand new studio albums. One is a collection of my most requested songs entitled YOU ASKED FOR IT, and the other is a themed LP about time travel. I look forward to sharing these with you soon. (Mari Ochiai)