

Special Interview with
Laura Ainsworth

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Laura Ainsworth is a Texas-based retro jazz singer who performs vibrant and convincing re-creations of original Great American Songbook songs, with a specialization in finding and reviving extremely rare old



songs that were only recorded a few times previously. Her music was introduced to Japanese jazz fans last year, when Disk Union began distribution of her vinyl-only compilation LP *Top Shelf* (2017). Ratspack Records has since agreed to distribute Ms. Ainsworth's entire discography to the Japanese market.

Ms. Ainsworth has three studio CD's to her credit: *Keep It to Yourself* (2011), *Necessary Evil* (2013), and

New Vintage (2017), in addition to the compilation LP *Top Shelf*. Ms. Ainsworth talked with *Jazz Critique* about these albums, and about her future plans and projects.

1. What experiences in your past made you decide to become a jazz singer?

Playing jazz runs in my family. My father, Billy Ainsworth, was highly respected amongst American musicians of his time for his skills playing clarinet and alto and tenor saxophone, and in writing big band arrangements. I grew up listening to the best singers and jazz instrumentalists, while my friends were listening to current pop and rock artists. I honestly felt as though I had been born in the wrong era. My first performances were in musical theater, in classic shows dating from decades past—numerous Rodgers & Hammerstein musicals in particular. There was no question in my mind that this would be the kind of music I would do, although now I tend to gravitate more toward Rodgers & Hart.

2. Your first album, *Keep It to Yourself*, came out in 2011. How did this album come about, and what was the response when it was first released?

I had thought a long time about doing a recording. But because I knew my CD's would have to compete against Ella Fitzgerald and Keely Smith reissues, I wanted to wait to do it until everything could be done in just the right way. It wasn't until 2011 that the time was finally right.

Previously, I was fortunate to work with Brian Piper. He was my music director for a one-person live music and comedy show I had written entitled *My Ship Has Sailed*. The *Keep It to Yourself* CD was a project he was excited about doing with me. He brought in the top jazz players from the famed University of North Texas jazz program for this and later projects. Many of these musicians had worked with my late father. In addition to being a masterful keyboard player, Brian is also a top producer, very much in demand in the Dallas area. I was surprised and honored when the album, which was a small, independent release, received great reviews and radio play around the world.

3. *Necessary Evil* (2013) is your second album, and it goes further to develop the themes introduced on *Keep It to Yourself*. Why did you opt to use the album to go deeper into the subject matter on the first album, instead of branching out?

The process of doing the first CD gave me the chance to discover what felt natural and like it was part of my own personality. I've always been a huge fan of film noir movies from the 1940s, and I love mixing wit with a little darkness and sultriness. The songs I'm most attracted to are of that kind of blend. The song "Keep It to Yourself" fits that description. It was the first song that I recorded, and the *Keep It to Yourself* album was built around that song. I love classic genres, but like to mix them up and add new elements, rather than trying to replicate the past (hence why I call my music "New Vintage"). So I opted to stay with what "worked" and felt right for me.

Of course, it was also still important to me to find great long-forgotten songs, and freshen them up with my own sound, the way Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra did in the 1950s. The noir-ish "One More Time" on *Necessary Evil* is one of those overlooked gems. It was by Frank Loesser and was only recorded a couple of times in the early 1930s.

4. On your third album, *New Vintage* (2017), you branch out and change direction a bit after developing a following with Vintage and Tiki enthusiasts in the United States. Tell us about these groups of people, and what you present on *New Vintage* that they seem to respond to.

The Vintage Movement is a group of people who are fascinated with the fashion and lifestyle of Western culture in the early and middle 20th Century. The movement gained a lot of steam in the 2010s due to the popularity of the *Mad Men* television series. The Tiki Revival is a recent resurgence of interest in mid-century Tiki culture, a lifestyle genre that was fascinated with exotic tropical locales. The Tiki Revival's familiar features include Exotica music, tropical mixed drinks like the Mai Tai and the Zombie, and décor like bamboo huts, Tiki gods and Tiki torches.

I am both a Vintage and a Tiki enthusiast myself. I love to wear vintage clothes and surround myself with original mid-century interior design. Members of the Dallas Vintage Society dressed very smartly in 1940s style to appear as extras in the award-winning music video for "That's How I Got My Start." Meanwhile, my time-capsule 1955 house is looking more and more like a tropical Tiki establishment. One reason for that is that it houses thirteen adopted parrots, who keep my home sounding like a tropical aviary. (I pose with one of the smaller ones on the back cover of *Keep It to Yourself*.)

The song on *New Vintage* that the Vintage and Tiki crowds seem to respond to the most, aside from the opening track "That's How I Got My Start," is "An Occasional Man." "An Occasional Man" was my first venture into tiki-themed music, and naturally, it comes complete with exotic bird calls.

5. The first three Laura Ainsworth albums are all only available on CD. The next album, *Top Shelf*, is a vinyl-only LP that collects tracks from the first three albums. Why did you choose the vinyl format for this compilation? Is it in any way related to the recent vinyl revival?

Yes, very much so. I'm thrilled that people are returning to the technology and format that "fit" the music that I sing. It was my dream to be on a real vinyl LP that resembled those from labels like Capitol and Verve by legends like Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Nat "King" Cole, Peggy Lee, Julie London and Rosemary Clooney. I feel as though I have "arrived" with this album.

6. We've read that you are planning a CD release of the *Top Shelf* album with a different track list for the Japanese market. What differentiates the upcoming CD with the LP version that is currently on the market?

I'm glad you asked. For starters, it will have more music! Since a CD doesn't have the strict time limits imposed by a two-sided vinyl record, I was able to add a few more of my favorite cuts that it pained me to leave off the vinyl edition. I was also able to include a bonus track, which is my rendition of "You'd Be Surprised". This song was recorded during the *Necessary Evil* sessions, but hasn't appeared on any of my previous CDs.

7. You recently worked out a distribution deal in Japan with Ratspack Records. How have your experiences with them been so far?

The distribution deal is through our Japanese representative David Gasten's company, Swing City Productions. Ratspack has been great to work with so far. And with Swing City Productions, I'm privileged to be in some very fine company, as Gasten is also working to export to Japan some other American CD collections from classic jazz singers Jane Harvey and Monica Lewis, the latter of whose autobiography rests on my coffee table! I'm proud to be a part of that.

8. What other plans do you have for the Japanese market?

Well, my top priority is to get out to Japan to perform live. I "dream a little dream" of being able to perform for a Japanese audience, perhaps as part of a roster of American vintage jazz and lounge artists, or maybe with some of Japan's wonderful local jazz musicians. In the meantime, I'm selecting songs for two upcoming CDs: one is a theme album about time travel, and the other is an album of my most-requested songs that will be entitled *You Asked For It*.

Laura Ainsworth Discography:

Studio Albums:

Keep It to Yourself (Eclectus Records CD, ER1001, 2011)*

Necessary Evil (Eclectus Records CD, ER1002, 2013)

New Vintage (Eclectus Records CD, ER1003, 2017)

Compilation Albums:

Top Shelf (Eclectus Records 180g LP, ER1004, 2017)

All albums released to Japan as American imports by Ratspack Records, March 25, 2020, with the exception of *, which was released to Japan April 29, 2020.