

## Could you tell us about your encounter with jazz?

My earliest encounter with jazz was when I was a little girl, about two or three years old. My parents used to listen to Nat King Cole on the record player. I distinctly remember hearing Nat's "Young at Heart" being played often. Sarah Vaughn and Nina Simon were also staples and still influence me to this day, especially Nina. I remember my father playing Sarah Vaughn's music in his car when he would drop my brother and I off at school in the mornings. Still, my singing jazz was a just random happenstance. Though my parents listened to jazz while I was growing up, I was heavily into pop and R&B that was playing on the radio at the time. I was in elementary school in the 80's and secondary school in the 90's, so I enjoyed Madonna, Boys II Men, Janet Jackson, SWV – all of the popular music of that era. This is also around the time I realized I liked singing and imagined myself being a pop star. In high school, I went to a yard sale one day and bought someone's old record player. It was an ugly beige color and basically made of plastic, but it worked and I wanted to have one for my bedroom, so I could listen on my headphones and really get into the songs. I then unearthed my parents' old records – Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin – and this was when I became serious about becoming a singer, writing songs, learning to harmonize. I listened to those records over and over, learning every vocal part. I joined the school choir around that time and sang every chance I got.

My foray into jazz, I feel, was quite by accident. Once I graduated from high school, I was accepted into the University of California, Riverside's music program. I majored in music with an emphasis in vocal performance. The first day at university, auditions to join various musical groups were being held. During an audition for one of the choirs, the director liked my voice and suggested I also audition for the jazz ensemble. I did audition and I was accepted. As far as I knew, they had never had a singer in the jazz ensemble. The director of the jazz ensemble at the time, Bill Helms, had performed with Sarah Vaughn and Frank Sinatra as a trombone player way back in the day. I thought that was a funny little connection. University was a great place for me to focus on learning my craft as a singer and explore songwriting. Bill, had us (the jazz ensembles) out performing in the community often and encouraged us to book our own gigs. This is where I began to put together my own groups and perform for various events around town. I was learning all the standards and I was learning how to scat. I still wasn't writing jazz songs, though. And though some of the jazz greats had heavily influenced me, I still considered myself a pop/R&B singer. I was writing pop songs and the big divas at the time, Celine, Mariah, Whitney – were a big influence on my singing and songwriting. I admired their vocal power and technique. Though I was almost exclusively singing jazz, I was in a bit of denial about actually *being* a jazz singer. I think it's just because I was young and, as far as I could tell, no famous young people were singing and writing jazz songs. I didn't see where I could fit into the jazz world.

When I graduated, I found the music world tough to navigate. It isn't like being a doctor or accountant where your path is clear and you know where you're going to work and how you're going to pay the rent. I lived at home with my parents at the time, so rent wasn't a concern, creating a path as a singer was my mission. I continued to book my own gigs, I was writing and recording music. In fact, I released my first EP while I was in college. I wrote

all the songs. I meant the recording to be a demo to pass around to producers and record labels, but I decided I would also release it independently. I also started singing back up for other artists. I'm not sure who was the first artist was or how they found me, but this is where my time singing in choirs and listening so intently to Stevie Wonders harmonies paid off. I loved doing it and it came to me easily. I was able to blend with other singers and compliment their sound.

### How your career as a singer began?

As I said earlier, I sang in the choir in school. When I was about sixteen, I toured the United States with a show choir for three months during one summer. When I returned home, I fell in with a girl group, comprised of myself and two other girls (who I didn't know at all). I'd met a manager that was forming a girl group with some producers. The plan was to shop the group to labels. They already had two girls and wanted one or two more. I auditioned and got in. I started recording with them right away. This is where I learned to work in a studio. I learned how to stack and blend backing and lead vocals and piece a song together vocally. I thoroughly enjoyed the process and I took to it right away. It was my first experience in a professional studio. We drove from Rialto, where I grew up, to Los Angeles. The drive was at least one hour and always late at night. The producers had tracks ready and they would write the songs on the spot. They would tell us what they wanted us to sing and we would sing it. We never performed for an audience, but we recorded several songs together. The group eventually broke up, as it was never picked up by a label, but it was a valuable learning experience for me. I would say that is where my career as a professional singer began. The skills I learned during that time still inform how I work in the studio.

### How have you reconciled your chorister life and of singer at the beginning of your career?

I've found it pretty easy to navigate artistry with working as a background singer. Both activities are of the same world and so that's never been a big problem for me. If I'm on a project that keeps me particularly busy, then that's fine with me. It means I'm making enough money to record my songs. I consider myself an artist, a singer and a songwriter. I think of it as wearing different hats. Some hats I wear more often than others. Most artists I know have to think of themselves in this way. We have many talents and abilities that we put to use in one way or another. We just balance it and make it work because we love it. I have to say it's much easier balancing artistry and background singing than artistry and working in an office, which I did for many years. I'd worked as a receptionist in several different settings. It was difficult because it left me with little energy to be creative and pursue music. I do know some creative types who find balance working in an office during the day and performing shows at night. I suppose it depends on the person. I do know some people who can make that work.

I also think that as an independent artist, when you're touring with someone as a side person, it can be easy to lose yourself. Some artists give their side people their "moment" in the show (or their chance to solo on stage) so the audience can know what each person is contributing. I have worked with artists for long stretches of time who don't give everyone

on stage that time as well. When this happens, it can be a bit easy to lose yourself and even forget the sound of your own voice resonating in a theater. Strange, but true. I've had that happen to me and didn't realize that it was happening until long after the fact. It's a bizarre experience. I'll have to ask some of my other friends who are indie artists and background singers if they've had this experience.

**Your EP "The Deep End" has marked your career beautifully and was critically acclaimed. Can you tell us something about its history?**

I'd been thinking about recording a jazz record for a long time. Until then all of my records were singer-songwriter with a heavy R&B influence. I'd also written my own songs up until that point, so I was used to the songs coming from me. I decided first that I only wanted to record songs that spoke to me. I wasn't sure what I wanted the record to sound like. I was not exactly sure how I wanted to approach the music. I wasn't working with any jazz producers. I hadn't had much luck hiring producers in the past and had ended up producing all of my records myself. When I was on tour with an artist performing at all the jazz festivals, I happened to meet a producer backstage. I was telling him all of this: that I wanted to record a jazz record, but all of the standards have been recorded and recorded again. How do I make it interesting? He said, "Don't worry about being interesting, just be personal." That advice stuck with me through the entire process of making 'The Deep End' and kept me connected with what I was trying to do, even if I was not always sure in the moment. That was some of the best advice I've ever gotten.

Sugar, All Blues and Gentle Rain had been a part of my repertoire since my college days. Wild is the Wind was one I had yet to perform, but was always particularly moved by and I knew someday I would record it. I wrote Silencio with my friend Jeff Cerie, who I've collaborated with many times. In fact, Silencio was the impetus for recording the EP. I'd created a demo for Silencio with Jeff in between touring and after thinking about what to do with it for a long while, decided it would be suited to a jazz record.

I've said in the past and I do believe that each record an artist releases is representative of what they're going through at a particular moment in time – the whole mood and energy of the project is bound up in their experiences. For me, it was no different. I had to face a lot of fears with this recording. As we got closer to recording the songs it became abundantly clear I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I'd never recorded a straight jazz record before. Usually, I've written the song, performed it several times and built it in the studio with the musicians and engineer. I came to realize that this was going to need more planning than I'd anticipated. What I did have were some concrete themes I wanted to include from our rehearsal tape.

I knew Mitchell Long (guitar) and Chuck Staab (drums) from singing back up for Melody Gardot. Les King (bass), I'd met him singing for an indie artist in LA and Pete Kuzma (piano) was good friends with Chuck. In the space of a few days we rehearsed once, we played one show and then we recorded the EP. In some ways, I think it worked to the benefit of the project in that on the day of the recording, there was a good, healthy nervousness, because no one knew how it was going to work. I think it was a necessary tension though, similar to that of playing before a live audience.

The day before the session, Mitchell came to my house and created the arrangements for Sugar, Gentle Rain and Wild is the Wind. All Blues was arranged in the studio on the spot. That is, once we were in the studio, I played what I liked from the rehearsal tape for the guys. Chuck had come up with the rhythmic feel for All Blues during rehearsal and it stood out to me. Also, the piano changes you hear at the beginning and end of the recording were on the rehearsal tape and I asked them to incorporate it at the beginning and end of the song. Chuck and Pete communicated with each other beautifully on the song and I remember watching the back and forth they had during the recording and being impressed by it. We recorded in one room and all songs including vocals were recorded in one day. I think I only went back in to re-sing the lead vocals to Gentle Rain and Silencio and add background vocals to Silencio. Pete Korpela (percussion) was busy touring, but wanted to be involved and recorded his parts remotely from a hotel room in Idaho.

Once we recorded the songs, I was afraid to listen to them and I didn't listen to them for at least a month or two afterwards. The entire experience was a bit chaotic to my mind and I think I was embarrassed by this fact. I was judging myself harshly. I had a hard time bringing myself to listen to it. It was my recording and mixing engineer, Thomas Hornig, who kept pushing me to listen to it and finish it. Had it not been for him, the record might never have seen the light of day. Finally, I gave in, listened and the more I lived with the recordings, the more I loved them. And, of course, now I'm happy and proud of how this project turned out. Thomas also encouraged me to submit *The Deep End* for the 2015 Grammys. I didn't think it would be worth my time, but Thomas had been with me the whole way through, he believed in the project and I wanted to give him the chance to enjoy any success we could gather for all his hard work. I agreed to submit and 'The Deep End' made it onto the ballot for Best Jazz Vocal Album, Best New Artist and Best Engineered Album. After all of that inner turmoil, it was a nice affirmation.

**Why did choose to record great standards on this EP?**

I recorded these particular standards because they have been a part of my life for many years. They were part of my education, not only in the literal sense, but in learning to shape my voice as a jazz artist. I wanted to acknowledge those songs and my past, which is steeped in jazz. Every time I've sung them, the meaning has changed for me. The mood and tone of the songs have evolved with me over the years. This is the exciting thing to me about jazz - the same song can be sung a million different times, in a million different ways. It's always fresh.

**Could you tell us more about the meaning of this title?**

Like I said, my past is steeped in jazz, there was a time I was not willing to embrace it, but over the years I've been able to. I think the meaning of the title "The Deep End" is that I am finally able to dive into who I am and accept myself no matter how vast the imperfections and no matter how willing others are to accept me. Over time, I've found that matters less and less. It's going to have to if I am going to live life as fully as I can and express myself as fully as I can. I think I came up with the title when I thought about all of the demons I was facing while conceiving and recording this project. I had to find some

shred of bravery, use it as sort of a life raft and dive into all of it, so to speak. It was a process, but I'm willing to go deep with it. Still, I feel like I am only scratching the surface.

Now what are your musical projects?

I am working on my next project. Deciding where I'd like to go next. I am exploring jazz more, along with blues and my Haitian roots. My mother is Haitian and I'm also rediscovering some of the folk records that my mother used to play at home when I was a child. I'm listening to that music and finding what resonates with me. I'm also deciding which standards to record next. I've been writing for my new project and I've been performing some of the new songs I've written, testing them for my audience. They seem to love the new stuff. Other projects I'm on right now are the TJ Doyle band, a kind of blues/rock/alternative sound. Tribute bands are huge right now and I sing with a few of those, which is tons of fun. I work with Bella Donna, a Tribute to Fleetwood Mac and Stevie Nicks; a tribute to the Supremes; and another to Duran Duran. All of it is fun – that's the important part!