

Pop Talk: Norah Jones takes 'simple music' and runs with it

by *George_Varga*

Norah Jones on "American Idol?"

Don't hold your breath.

"I enjoy it as a TV show and I think there's a place for it, but I can't imagine that I'd be invited to appear," said Jones, 28, the best-selling female singer-songwriter of the past five years.

NORAH JONES - Norah Jones has been the best-selling female singer-songwriter of the past five years. CNS Photo courtesy of Danny Clinch. "I am the antithesis of 'American Idol' and I think I'd be a terrible candidate to be on that show, for that reason. Because everything they stand for, musically, is what I don't stand for. I would not be a good guest-host; I can't imagine what I would say (to the contestants)."

Jones gauged her chances of succeeding on "American Idol" by alluding to another hit TV show, "Survivor."

"If I had been a contestant on 'American Idol,' I'm sure I would have been booted off the island," she giggled.

She's probably right, even though Jones has sold 15 million albums since the release of her 2002 debut, "Come Away With Me." She has done so by showcasing musical qualities - subtlety, concision, impeccable taste and an impressive command of dynamics - rarely even hinted at on the histrionics-fueled "American Idol."

Yet, despite the fact that her understated singing, spare piano work and whisper-soft, jazz-inflected songs are at great odds with most pop music - or perhaps for that very reason - Jones has made a major impact, commercially and artistically. She's a quiet revolutionary.

"I'm better singing ballads than other stuff, but I like other stuff. I like simple music and have a knack for it," she said. "My favorite simple music example is Tom Waits' 'Picture in a Frame' (from 1999's 'The Mule Variations' album). That's simple, but it's also one of the most beautiful songs I've ever heard. It's just him singing, piano and a bass saxophone that comes in, and it's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard. Those are the best songs. You think: 'It's so simple, I could've written it,' but not really. Those are the things I love most."

Jones' first album was a marvel of simplicity and directness, yet is also rich in musical nuances. It sold 10 million copies and earned her five Grammy Awards, including Album of the Year and Best New Artist.

Released this January, her third album, the equally enticing "Not Too Late," both refines and expands her less-is-more musical approach and her ability to convey a wealth of emotion in hushed tones.

Produced by Lee Alexander, her boyfriend, songwriting collaborator and longtime bassist, "Not Too Late" explores themes that are more complex - and alternately more serious and humorous - than she has sung about in the past. Recorded primarily in her new home studio in Manhattan, it is also her first album for which she wrote or co-wrote all the songs, including the stirring, politically inspired "Sinkin' Soon" and "My Dear Country."

"I really like that this album is not all love songs and that there are different topics. I think there's a lot of variety and it flows really well," Jones said from a tour stop in Toronto.

"We tried to make the album in a very relaxed way. We just started recording the songs and wondering what

they'd sound like. We didn't go into it with an idea of anything - it just formed itself through trial and error. And, luckily, we had a lot of time to make it because no one at the record label knew we were making it."

Was there anything she wanted to avoid with "Not Too Late," which sold more than a million copies in four months (an impressive tally in this era of dwindling sales and a rapidly imploding record industry)?

"The only thing I like to avoid is making the same album that I already made before," she said. "I know some people will say it sounds the same to them, but I think it's very different. I'm very proud of the songs and my writing is more focused."

Before she moved to New York in 1999 to pursue music full time, Jones was a jazz piano major at the University of North Texas in Denton. One of her classmates there was 2007 "American Idol" contestant Brandon Rogers, who made it to the final 12 this spring before being voted off.

But Rogers earned a music degree, while Jones dropped out after two years. Her decision to leave school to try her luck in the Big Apple did not sit well with her mother.

"She was really unhappy. She really wanted me to not do that!" Jones recalled. "After I was in New York about eight months, I got very depressed. I was 20 and lonely, and I called my mom, crying, one night. I said: 'I'm going to come back home to Texas. I'm sorry. Can I come back?' And even though she was mad I'd dropped out, she said: 'Give it a year. Don't give up so fast. Then come back, if you still want to.' I thought that was pretty cool."

Reflecting on her rapid rise to fame, Jones recalled her best music job, pre-stardom.

"It was playing at this restaurant in Dallas called PoPoLos Cafe," she said. "It was a nice Italian place, not a family-style restaurant, but a big, high-end corporate restaurant. I had a gig there every Saturday night, playing three hours of solo piano, and they encouraged me to sing. I was trying to learn how to sing and play piano at the same time, which is like chewing gum and patting your head.

"I was terrible at practicing and that was the best practice I had. It paid great, \$100 a night, plus free food and tips, which was a lot for me. My rent in Denton at the time was \$300 a month, so I made my rent just from doing that gig."

And her worst music job?

Jones groaned.

"When I finally got a gig in New York, it was not fun," she said. "It was in the West Village, a two-hour gig that paid \$10 an hour, and it was the weirdest gig, from 3 to 5 p.m. I didn't know why they'd have a piano player at those hours, when nobody was there. I realized I'd rather wait tables to make money and then do gigs that were fun, so that I didn't have to do a lot of crummy gigs.

"I still love to play. For me, music is still fun. If I feel like I'm doing something because I have to, I stop."

Jones recently starred in her first feature film, "My Blueberry Nights," which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in May.

She's open to other film roles. But her primary focus remains music, whether as a solo artist with her own band or as a member of the punk-oriented Mazelles and such alt-country groups as The Little Willies and The

Sloppy Joannes. And when it comes to career longevity, her role model is her father, Indian music legend Ravi Shankar, who hasn't cut back on his performing and recording schedule even as he approaches 90.

"I think I will be doing music as long as my dad, regardless of whether I sell records or not," Jones said. "The past few years showed me I can make music and that it doesn't have to be such a big deal (as her first album), and that I can get just as much satisfaction playing in bars for nobody, for (payment in) drink tickets. My dad is 87 and just did a tour, and that's a testament to the power of doing what you love."

Copley News Service Let's work together; memorable musical pairings

Norah Jones was still an unknown in early 2002 when she found herself collaborating with such musical admirers as John Mayer and Willie Nelson. Since then, she's worked with a wide array of artists, from Ryan Adams, Charlie Hunter and Dolly Parton to Bonnie Raitt, Jolls Holland and the Dirty Dozen Brass Band.

Here's a look at Jones' memorable musical pairings with:

- Foo Fighters, "Virginia Moon": Making this lilting ballad for the 2005 album "In Your Honor" was a dream come true for Jones. She had a major crush on singer, guitarist and head Fighter Dave Grohl back when he drummed in Nirvana.

Jones: "I'd been in love with him as a musician since I was 11. And he's younger than some other musicians I've worked with, so it was a situation where you want to be cool."

- OutKast, "Take Off Your Cool": This standout cut from OutKast's 2003 double-album, "Speakerboxxx / The Love Below," finds Jones trading seductive vocals with Andre 3000. It segues into a remake of John Coltrane's epic version of "My Favorite Things," with a zippy, acid-jazz beat added under Jones' fleet piano solo.

- Ray Charles, "Here We Go Again": Part-country, part-blues, this choice ballad from Charles' multi-Grammy Award-winning 2004 album, "Genius Loves Company," is a sly, understated treat from start to finish.

Jones: "Of all the people I've worked with, I was probably most intimidated by Ray because he was so huge among my musical influences. He was really nice, but I was terrified to sing with him. I didn't even want to open my mouth; I just wanted to watch him sing."

- Keith Richards, "Love Hurts": Recorded at a 2004 all-star tribute to the late country-rock pioneer Gram Parsons, this classic song of emotional longing was not written by Parsons. But he recorded a great 1972 version of it with Emmylou Harris, and Jones rises to the occasion with gruff-voiced Rolling Stones guitarist Richards. It's available only on the live DVD "Return to Sin City - a Tribute to Gram Parsons."

Jones: "Keith is amazing. I first met him in 2002 on a Willie Nelson TV special, and he was amazing then. He's so nice and sweet. When I got to do the Gram Parsons thing I knew Keith was very cool, but I was still excited. He's so fun to be around. And he smells really good!"

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