Nellie McKay fights for worthy causes ... including herself

by George_Varga

Nellie McKay is a walking bundle of contradictions. A gifted pop music maverick, she's wise and talented beyond her years but also full of anxiety and self-doubt, as only a junk food-loving vegan and animal-rights activist can be.

THE DEFIANT ONE - 'I like sleeping. I don't like working,' claims pop singer/songwriter Nellie McKay, who has released three albums (two of them double-CDs) since 2004. 'I'd just like to pursue the pleasure principle, full-speed.' CNS Photo courtesy of Amy T. Zielenski. "I'm pretty indiscriminating, and I have awful taste, generally," insisted McKay, 25.

Her contention might be easier to swallow if her svelte blend of pop, jazz, hip-hop, torch ballads and left-of-center Broadway-styled cabaret wasn't so uniformly smart and distinctive. Or if McKay's best work didn't suggest an unlikely cross between Bette Midler, Doris Day and Ella Fitzgerald, mixed with an artistic sensibility so acerbic she at times makes Ani DiFranco and Alanis Morissette sound like unassuming suburban housewives.

The quality of McKay's work as a singer, songwriter and skilled multi-instrumentalist is impressive, but no more so than the defiant air of independence she brings to her music and her life.

This holds true whether it's on her three albums (the latest of which, "Obligatory Villagers," features jazz sax greats Phil Woods and Dave Liebman), on stage (she recently co-starred with Edie Falco and Alan Cumming in a Broadway production of "The Threepenny Opera") or in her upcoming musical film debut ("The Amazing True Story of a Teenage Single Mom").

"My quality on screen is best compared to O.J. Simpson's - overwrought double-takes," McKay said, only half in jest.

Her tart sense of humor first became apparent to the public at large when she named her acclaimed 2004 debut album "Get Away From Me." It was a playful response to the title of Norah Jones' multi-Grammy Award-winning album "Come Away With Me."

One of the most oft-quoted lyrical couplets from McKay's maiden voyage was: Yeah, I like my coffee black / Oh, look, they bombed Iraq. Other songs examined such varied topics as skewed love, sexual politics, existential angst, and dogs and cats (McKay is a staunch animal-rights activist).

Her determination to do things her way, or not at all, also came to the fore in 2004. It was then that she engaged in a heated dispute with Columbia Records to release "Get Away From Me" as the double-album she envisioned, not the single disc the label wanted to release. McKay prevailed, but only after agreeing to the label's demand that she compensate by financing her second album on her own.

"I love anybody who drives record companies crazy and rattles the establishment," said jazz sax legend Woods, who taught McKay music-arranging when she was a teenager and is one of her mentors.

"For a brand-new artist to insist on making a double album, well, Nellie has spirit aplenty. She got off to a giant start. And, if I know Nellie, she'll make a huge impact on the music world. I fully expect her to."

McKay later became embroiled in a very public dispute over her second album, the even more ambitious "Pretty Little Head," which featured McKay collaborating with fellow singers k.d. lang and Cyndi Lauper. Columbia flatly refused to issue it as the 23-song, two-CD set she delivered, which the label insisted was seven songs and one CD too long.

She responded by blasting Columbia on stage at her concerts. She even went so far as to give out the unlisted cell phone number of the label's president and encouraged audience members to call him on her behalf. "Pretty Little Head" finally came out as a two-CD set, but only after she was dropped by Columbia and released it on her own label, Hungry Mouse Records.

"It's a Catch-22. We got some things out through (Columbia) that maybe otherwise we couldn't have, but I don't feel that much of what you allow them to take is worth it," McKay said.

Ironically, her enticing new album, "Obligatory Villagers," has only nine songs and clocks in at less than 32 minutes. Given her previous creative battles, is her unexpectedly brief new release some sort of wry riposte to Columbia Records?

"I love the term 'wry riposte' and must use it more often," McKay said with a laugh. "It's certainly ironic. You're much less attached to songs when you don't have to fight for them anymore. When you can put out anything you want on your album, you allow it to flow as it naturally should, instead of feeling stifled."

Brevity aside, "Obligatory Villagers" is one of the more quirkily arresting albums in recent memory. Part jazz, part disco, part rap, part reggae, it sounds like nothing else around at the moment. The opening cut, "Mother of Pearl," finds McKay (a devoted equal-rights advocate) taking barbed aim at feminism while throwing in a few tap-dancing segments for good measure.

The song includes such memorable zingers as: They say child molestation isn't funny / Rape and degradation's just a crime / Rampant prostitution, sex for money / Can't these chicks do anything but whine?

What results brings to mind Randy Newman's controversial 1977 hit "Short People," which skewered bigotry by pretending to champion it.

"I really don't care what people say. It's amazing that feminism continues to exist at all, considering how much counter-feminism is out there," McKay said. "So, I'm glad if people can listen to some music and maybe

fix some prejudices of their own, just by thinking."

Presumably, then, she regards music as a cathartic release for her frustrations with the world at large, some of which she incisively targets on "Identity Theft," another standout song on her new album. Or does she?

"No, it's not very satisfying," she said wistfully. "It's much more satisfying to punch someone."

Has she?

McKay laughed playfully, then grew more serious. "I will say that art may well be the only thing that lasts, so I guess it's worth trying," she said. "As someone who considers herself a pacifist, politically, I find it very hard to deal with the obfuscation and arrogance - combined with the raging stupidity and lack of consideration - that's out there.

"It often makes me want to give up on language and resort to violence. ... But the person I most irritate is myself."

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