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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: October 14, 2009 03:57 PM

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Exclusive: Nellie McKay Talks About Her Best Album Yet

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Singer, songwriter, comedienne, actress and all around **career gal Nellie McKay** likes to give off an air of scatter-brained goofiness. But in fact she doesn't have just the comic timing of Gracie Allen of Burns & Allen fame. She also has Allen's smarts. (George Burns always insisted Gracie was the brains of the act.)

McKay has had a **turbulent career** that she cheerfully admits to inadvertently sabotaging one way or another from the start. But she's also moved steadily upwards in the public eye, from her double CD debut on Sony

(perhaps the first by a female artist) to her acclaimed turn on Broadway in a revival of *The Threepenny Opera*.

Now she's back on a major label -- in this case, the artist-friendly Verve, home to Teddy Thompson and others -- with **her fourth album, *Normal As Blueberry Pie***, a warm and quietly marvelous tribute to Doris Day that is easily McKay's most accessible and broadly appealing work yet. Produced by McKay and her mother Robin Pappas, it's sincere -- McKay has been a fan since high school -- but it's also smart.

She's always had a high profile -- McKay is clever, gives great quotes, is charmingly controversial (McKay tussled with a major record label over artistic freedom and Columbia University over animal testing), attractive and above all wildly talented.

But this album hits the sweet spot in combining her talent and sensibility (future-retro?) in one focused project. That's why everyone from the *New York Times* and *Vanity Fair* to the *New York Post* has taken notice.

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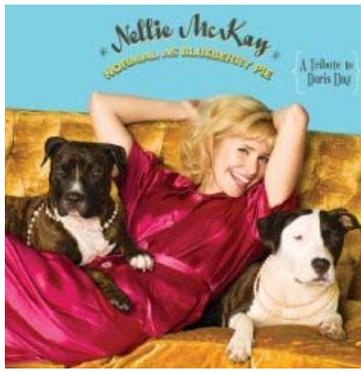
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"I tried to be just a singer of standards when I was starting out," says McKay on a break from rehearsals for her tour.

"And there was nothing special enough about my voice to make it that far. So I feel a bit like Rod Stewart. Once you've had that rock career, people will give you that chance where otherwise they might not."

She admits to having worked her way through some 600 songs of her favorite artist via a pile of CDs, a "very messy, un-Doris Day-looking pile." And whittling it down to 12 covers and an original was not easy.

"We probably missed a whole host of things and frankly I'm relieved," jokes McKay. "Her career is so underrated. She did such a diversity of styles over such a long period of time. She never stopped. We tried to give a representation of all the...um...crevices in which her star shone. I was searching for a good image and don't think I found it there."

"Having to pick was agony," says McKay, who was born in London, grew up in New York and lives in New York City. "But Doris Day has a better voice than me and she sang a lot of really difficult songs. So in some cases it wasn't hard to choose because I just couldn't do them."

"'It's Magic' is difficult. It starts up there. She had a lot like that. Or there were ones I love her arrangements so much, like 'Confess,' a duet she did. We had trepidations about 'Close Your Eyes,' because her version with Andre Previn was so great, and that's what makes you want to do it but then you want to do something different with it."

So McKay sidesteps the obvious tunes like "Que Sera Sera" and "It's Magic" and the *Strictly Ballroom* gem "Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps" and mines less obvious numbers like "Do, Do, Do," "Black Hills Of Dakota," and the Burt Bacharach-Hal David gem "Send Me No Flowers." (Day, like Dionne Warwick, had a gift for making tricky melodies sound effortless.) She does tackle the granddaddy of them all, Day's breakthrough hit and World War II heart-tugger "Sentimental Journey." But it slides in beautifully beside her intimate and playful spins on classics like "The Very Thought Of You," which opens the album.

"I just knew the Doris Day version," says McKay about that number. "I'd heard it so much because it was on the *Young Man With A Horn* soundtrack. It's one of her best movies and one of her best records. I wore that record out in high school and wanted to be a big band singer. All the songs from that album, I knew her version so much it was hard for me not to sound like her. Then in looking it up I realized that Billie Holiday had done it and I used to have a rule that I would never do anything that Billie Holiday had done because I just didn't want to suffer that comparison. I realized as I was writing it [the arrangement] that I was hearing a waltz and that's what lends it a carnival feel."

Critics have responded with some of the best reviews of her career. The New York Times said, "there's yearning, wryness, and ingenuity in her arrangements." Paste Magazine said it's "....everything a tribute record should be. And Bob Boilen of NPR's All Songs Considered said it's "an album free of cynicism, full of heart and more elegant than a mere nostalgia trip...I can honestly say that she's from another time"

McKay is one of the few people to have interviewed Day in recent years (it was for *Bark* magazine) and even reviewed a Doris Day biography for the New York Times. And her love and deep knowledge of Day's career comes out when discussing the music, like "Wonderful Guy," which came from *South Pacific* and isn't a tune one would associate with Day.

"Well, she did a Broadway album. And I think Richard Rodgers wanted Doris Day for the character of Nellie. And it had that Doris Day spirit."

The arrangement by one of her collaborators -- Paul Holderbaum -- has a fascinating minor key feel that gives the tune a ruminative air rather than its usual bouncy cheerfulness.

"One of the people who worked on our album plays in the orchestra of the revival and she didn't recognize the tune," says McKay. "She said, 'What song is that?' and she plays it every night. I think that's a compliment."



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Not that the album has a dissonant air: it's tuneful, breezy and downright plucky, especially on the comic number "Crazy Rhythm." McKay loves that sort of song and has recorded witty numbers herself, though in general rock and roll looks down on humor.

"The lyrics are fantastic, the feel of that song... I can't express my love of that song in words. To me, that's the best of New York," says McKay. "I think the jazz world as well as the pop world can become too self-serious. The best of all types of music has always had a wink in it. Louis Armstrong always had that sense. When Billie Holiday sang the saddest song, she had a sense of humor about herself. And Dylan and the Beatles. When you go to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, it's all those bands that are like, 'WE ARE ROCK AND ROLL!' and then they spit and stamp out. To me, the real deal doesn't have to try so hard."

And let's face it, "Crazy Rhythm" is fun just because you get to sing "Shoo! shoo!"

"Originally, I had included a Mayor Michael Bloomberg rant. It was kind of a Betty Boop-ish rant but that was just on one take. That old-fashioned stuff; it's just so sweet. I got a lot of that arrangement from Whispering Jack Smith. I don't know if you know him, but on YouTube there's [a version of him doing 'Crazy Rhythm.'](#)"

And no album with a ukulele -- an instrument I associate with George Harrison ever since I heard he always traveled with two ukuleles in case someone he met wanted to play one too -- can be accused of anything other than a desire to delight.

"I'm surprised he played it," says McKay about Harrison, "because it's so simple. But of course you can do such amazing things. I'm glad it's having such a revival. It's a sweet little instrument. And it's a great one for kids or adults if they want something that won't hurt your fingers too bad and they can sing a little song. It makes music more democratic."

But that Bloomberg comment is no off-hand joke. McKay is committed to being politically active and not just on animal rights issues.

"I love Michael Moore's movies," says McKay, who asked if I'd seen *Capitalism: A Love Story* yet. "I saw *Sicko* ten times and I was always taking different people to it and pretending I hadn't seen it before and naturally laughing at things I wouldn't naturally laugh at again but I had to pretend I'd never seen it before."

She appears at benefits and protests and speaks out wittily and forcefully on a range of issues. Yes, she admits that an artist's politics can turn you off. But they can also make you like them even more, which is exactly what happened when she heard about Day's tireless work for animals.

"It can make someone mean much more to you than they would otherwise," says McKay. And it works the other way too. Art can make you not care about someone's politics.

"I know my Auntie is going to love this album," says McKay. "And she's such a tree hugger and feeds the squirrels. And she loves Barbara Bush. So it is that nice thing that art can transcend your differences. There can be no people that get on your nerves more than people you agree with politically. How many anti-war protests have I been to that I wanted to kill someone?"

The one original on the album -- "If I Ever Had A Dream" -- is also a neat testament to how long McKay has been a fan of Day.



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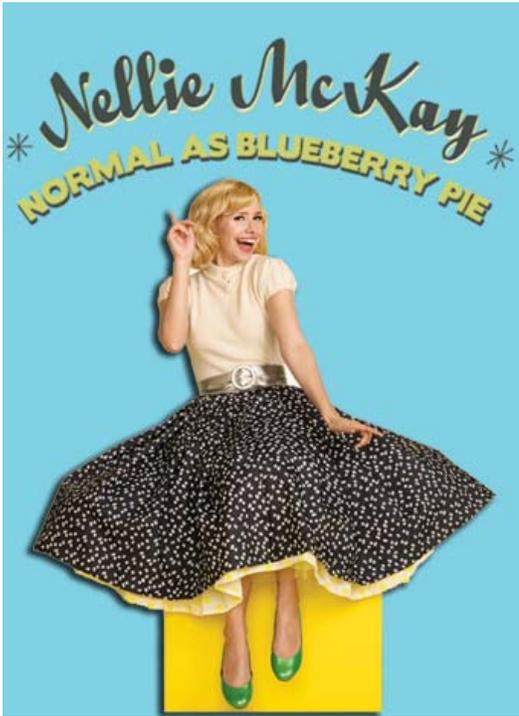


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"I wrote it in high school when I was listening to her non-stop. So it was completely inspired by her. But I wrote it for concert band so it didn't have lyrics. We came up with lyrics that were reflective of animals and the idea of living free from human-imposed suffering."

How did it go over in concert band all those years ago -- ok, ten years ago? McKay breaks down laughing.

"Oh my God, it was the *Ishtar* of my high school days. It went over so bad."



Ishtar of course is about a couple of failed songwriters. McKay is the exact opposite, a protean talent who is about to find her perfect outlet: musicals. And not just as an actress. She scored in *Threepenny Opera* (getting about the only good reviews in that revival) but anyone who has listened to her eclectic, quirky, sometimes hilarious albums knows she would be ideal for working on a musical. Which may explain why a big part of her day is taken up with various projects. McKay has been working on two musicals with an eye on Broadway, including *Election* (based on the Reese Witherspoon and Matthew Broderick movie as well as the book it came from) and *The Kid*, based on the Dan Savage book about two gay men raising a child. There's also a feature film musical based on a graphic novel about a teenage girl who gets pregnant. That became a lot easier to sell when you could suddenly pitch the long-gestating project as *Juno: The Musical*.

So she's busy. (And any network executive with half a brain would convince McKay to do a variety show for TV. Imagine, she comes out, chats merrily, sings a song, does a few sketches, duets with a guest and then a classic cover to send us on our way. Heaven.) But an innocent query -- "Are you in a relationship?" -- prompts a long, awkward, hilarious silence as McKay hems and haws over how to gracefully not answer (or perhaps isn't quite certain herself?). Her professional relationships, however, are much easier to define. After years of endless struggles, she's happily in bed with another record label. After all, putting out an album by yourself is exhausting work

"It's great fun," says McKay about Verve. "It's a gas. It can get kind of lonely out there. I'm reading *Steppenwolf* and he wanted that solitude and when he gets it he feels like he can't go back to that ordinary world. It's nice to be back in the fold. Someone with my organizational talents? I'm no Ani DiFranco or Aimee Mann. You need a little help from your friends."

So will she take it project by project or do she and Verve have long-range plans?

"I signed [away] the next ten years and my first born child. Those contracts!" says McKay. "So far, everything is going great. I don't know if it's like family or having a roommate. As long as you put out the garbage and like the same TV shows, it'll be okay."

But do they know your next album could be a three CD collection of lullabies?

"In Swedish!" she bursts out laughing.

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esaslaw 01:05 PM on 11/09/2009

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Regina and Nellie are complimentary, in my opinion. Regina's lyrics are, generally a bit darker than Nellie's, but her voice is just too gorgeous to be put down as these two comments do, and she is a creative composer of stupendous ability.

I love them both and would love to see both together covering one another's music.

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paulabflat 12:54 PM on 10/15/2009

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wowsa! nellie mckay finally gettin' some notice. it's about time. there just aren't enough ukulele playing petite blonde feminist singer songwriters out there. far as i'm concerned. love this song as she performs it. check out her others on youtube. then watch ukulele ike's version. doors will open.

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jaymeister 11:35 PM on 10/14/2009

0 Fans

Nellie doing a variety show? That makes too much sense. I would settle for her being booked as a guest on variety shows or talk shows more often. Several times I've written to SNL to suggest her as a musical guest. This past week they had Regina Spektor, who isn't half the talent that Nellie is. Nellie can do Regina-type stuff, but Regina could never pull off this kind of album. Speaking of this album, it's simply sublime. I have to say that Meditation is my favorite track. I hope Nellie starts to get the recognition her immense talent deserves.

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Michael Giltz 01:55 PM on 10/16/2009
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Well, I like Regina Spektor too (I think her new album is great) but you're certainly right that Nellie McKay should be a musical guest -- and heck, the main guest, though of course since SNL isn't that funny it might not be so much fun for her. But she's got the chops, having been on Broadway and worked as a stand-up comic. "Mediation" is a great track, as is the album. Thanks for reading.

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