

asa **CABARET** SCENES

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2021**

**Melissa
Errico**

**Mark
Janas**

**Virtual
Cabaret
Convention**

**Richard
Skipper**

**Anne &
Mark
Burnell**



Melissa Errico

Shining Star

By **Todd Sussman**

***"If my voice was warm...
If I could concentrate—
I'd be in the Follies!
I'd be in a cabaret!"***

Melissa Errico once sang those words of wishful imagination as Dot in a highly regarded production of *Sunday in the Park with George*. Yet, while Dot posed them as "ifs," for Melissa, they are sparkling realities.

From modern pop to the standards to jazz, her lyric soprano voice—by turns ethereal and earthy—





has charmed audiences across the globe. And she has collaborated with the crème de la crème of songwriters from the worlds of both theater and film. Her résumé includes entire albums and concerts devoted to the legendary Michel Legrand—as well as Mr. Sondheim

singer.” It has a pleasingly seductive wink to it. My debut engagement of that kind of singing was at the Café Carlyle no less. At the time, I was told I was the



MELISSA ERRICO *Hurry Home*
MUSIC BY MICHEL LEGRAND
LYRICS BY ALAN & MARILYN BERGMAN



himself. She is equally at ease whether backed by a solo piano or by a 100-piece orchestra. You may have enjoyed her diverse performances on TV, in the movies, or on the Broadway stage. But Melissa loves the nightlife—so our conversation begins at the cabaret.

Todd Sussman They say you never forget your first time. So, tell me about your first time... performing in a cabaret club.

Melissa Errico My first time singing in a cabaret was in March 2002. Isn't it funny how that word has overtaken "nightclub," a word I find more glamorous, more Billie Holiday/Sinatra, to describe what singers like me do? I'd be glad to be called a "nightclub

youngest to sing there. It really was a very different place back then, not a place where a young lady appears!



I started off with "The Song Is You," which is a wonderful number. My great director, Lee Roy Reams, told me to use it to make eye contact, to say hello with my eyes, to not look over the heads of my guests. In a way, it's hard to make eye contact with the lyric, "Why can't I let you know the song my heart would sing? Some beautiful rhapsody of love and youth and spring!" There I was singing, staring into the eyes of a middle-aged man from New Jersey as he chewed his steak and winked at me. Anyway, it was

These pages from left
Some of the talent
responsible for Melissa
Errico's *Legrand Affair*
Front Marilyn Bergman
back Alan Bergman
Phil Ramone
Melissa's single of
"Hurry Home"
With Legrand
Phil Ramone
Melissa Errico
Michel Legrand
In performance

tremendous fun, and I'm still proud to believe I was the youngest artist to play that room in that era.

In those days, there was always a late show, every night, which is my idea of *real* decadence. I had two beautiful black Morgane Le Fay dresses (a great Soho designer), and I would sit at the bar, waiting for the late show. Not drinking!

That's poison for a singer. Lee Musiker,

sitting at the candlelit bar of the Carlyle, in black, waiting for the late show.

TS Are there certain cabaret venues that you gravitate to?

ME I want a warm room, a decent vibe without too many people talking, and an in-tune piano. But part of the joy of the art form is making intimacy where it seems resistant; so give me a dress and a jazz man and I'll try to warm it up. Feinstein's/54 Below here in New York has been my home base for



my music director, looked at me and asked, "You love this, don't you?," meaning the whole late-night, black-dress, girl-singer, Peggy Lee, broken-heart, hardboiled jazz-poet-musician vibe. He was right. I did. And I still do. I always will. It's odd because I'm also a hard-working mother of three adolescent girls now, but a part of me is always

many years, but I've also done some sassy, swinging stuff at Birdland. These days, I also love singing in London at the Zédel. Pray to God all these places reopen when the damn pandemic is played out.

TS Cabaret performing is a specialized art unto itself—more intimate and close-up.

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MELISSA ERRICO

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How do you prepare for a performance?

ME Part of my theatrical training is a faith in rehearsal, run-through, and preparation. Just running a show to know where the traps are. You can only do that once or twice with a cabaret show. There's usu-

I want the audience to leave with more than memories of good music and a hot dress.

ally no rehearsal time, just a sound check. So, I try to do as much pre-prep as I can.

I make my set list, study it, and share it with my

joke that lands when I come out? It's as intricate an art form as stand-up comedy, all timing and sequence and openness to chance. I think there's no wrong, but there are nights when it's just so *right*.

TS Your live shows of late have been described as "cabaret-essay."

ME Ha! That's an expression that began as a joke between some writer friends of mine. When they come to hear me, they expect more than a flat bunch of tunes. I always have a story to tell.

In recent years, I've started to think so much differently about cabaret. I've owned my love of art, reading, and poetry and really tried to give my cabaret shows the shape and heft of an essay. When I sing, I also include a little essay of appreciation to the songwriter. It makes me feel more raw, more emotional, more sensual, more musically entranced. I want to give the songs a fresh context. I want the audience to leave with more than



musicians and script writer, if

These pages from left
Melissa Errico
shares a shot with
Tony Bennett

Some of Melissa's
favorite musicians
Rob Mathes
Joe Bonadio
Russell Malone
ME, Tedd Firth
Zev Katz

With the *Sublime*
Stephen Sondheim
And as Dot in
Sunday in the Park
with George



there is one, and turn it upside down and left to right. Do I open with something driving—"Everybody Says Don't"—or is that too obvious? Is it more fun to start with something sly and a little slower and seductive, like "Sooner or Later?" Or do I want a

memories of good music and a hot dress. Those too, of course!

TS You are presenting a series of three streaming concerts with conversation (with renowned New Yorker writer Adam Gopnik) for French Institute Alliance Française (FI AF). In the first one, you effortlessly glide from singing in French to English and back again. It's a welcome return to the stage for you, but with social distancing, minus the in-person audience.

What was that experience like?

ME Our rapport made the FIAF concerts easy, but it's killing me not to have an audience. But Tedd Firth was there at the piano, Adam was behind plexiglass, and I was centerstage. Cameramen in masks roamed all over. Singing in Covid times is still a work in progress. You finish a song and wait for the applause and the lights dying down, and then—bupkis!

But Adam, Tedd, and I found a new kind of livestream cabaret format. We turned the FIAF night into a three-way conversation. We supplied our own audience for each other.

TS For the FIAF concert, Adam Gopnik wrote specialty lyrics for the witty musical patter woven into Cole Porter's "I Love

Not on your life. I'll never be ungracious, but I did want to start asserting myself more. Once I began my career as a writer—six pieces in *The New York Times* now—I couldn't run away from the high-brow identity. It seemed funny to me to sing it out right at the top of the show and to kid myself a bit. Adam's lyrics capture his genius for wordplay and allow me to show my sheer pleasure in having sophisticated fun!

TS For the FIAF songs, it's basically just you and the amazing Tedd Firth on piano out there. Is that daunting?

ME No, I love it. All music-making is daunting, but I never feel naked with Tedd. We had one new David Shire song for FIAF, "This World Is Mine," written in a slightly medieval mode with a pop pulse. I initially thought of having a recorded track with medieval instruments, but Tedd said no, he'd take care of it, and there it was, an entirely medieval ensemble. We were in a 12th-century castle with just one



Paris." One line really stood out for me: "I'm the chanteuse who is also a highbrow." Did you set out to consciously merge those two distinct facets into your career?

ME I always felt a little torn between my love of art and ideas and my life as a singer and actress. Actresses are supposed to show passion and accept powerlessness. We smile and back away from the light in the middle of the darkened theater and say thank you. We never say, "I've read better translations of Chekhov than this."



piano. Through Tedd's hands, I heard lute, harp, guitar, oboe, continuo.

TS On the other end of the spectrum, your *Legrand Affair* album features a 100-piece orchestra. How did Michel Legrand arrive at the decision to make this a huge, symphonic recording?

ME Michel was one of the greatest French

popular composers, perhaps the greatest French popular composer since Offenbach. We had bonded two years earlier when he was the composer for *Amour*, our Broadway show that wasn't the hit we had hoped for. We both received Tony nominations, but alas, we did not bring home the Tony on awards night.

It was Michel's idea to conceive an album with me. We worked tirelessly, going through every song he ever wrote to find the ones that would best suit me. He gravitated to songs that were tender, caressing, and with melodies I could make sound conversational. After this intense and invigorating preparation, I will never forget the moment he stood up, pacing around my Soho loft, and said: "Melissa, it will be oceanic—and intime." He decided to record the album with the 100-piece Brussels Philharmonic. I was delighted to create the gentlest music imaginable, but with a vastness, an embracing quality. I loved the idea of music both orchestral and intimate. When I walked into the concert hall in Leuven for that first recording session—a concert hall because there were no studios large enough for the symphony Michel had assembled—I was moved to tears. My husband, Patrick McEnroe—who Michel adored and playfully nicknamed "The Baron"—was at my side and was utterly speechless.

TS The deluxe edition of *Legrand Affair* contains "Hurry Home," the final song written for a film (*Max Rose*) by Michel in partnership with Alan and

These pages
from left
He aced it!
Melissa Errico
with hubby
Patrick McEnroe
With daughters
clockwise
Juliette, Victoria
and mom
hugging Diana
And with
Tedd Firth

Marilyn Bergman.
What was your
reaction when you found
out you would be
debuting a film song
by that legendary
songwriting team?
ME I was thrilled!
Everything around
Michel Legrand and

the Bergmans seems to be a string of blessings, which I never take for granted. I remember we had to hurry because they needed the movie ready for the Cannes Film Festival. To have the song debut at Cannes was a grand honor!

"Hurry Home" is such a profoundly beautiful story song, and Warner Music released it as a single with my first official music video. We had an amazing shoot, exploring the psychology of the song in a black velvet room, on black and white film, zooming deep into my eyes for the small ways the melody and words wash over my soul. It's a song that reflects on a whole life with a spouse, a long-standing love, and a lack of fear of death.



Sometimes it's time to come home. Life becomes a dreamscape, and togetherness is defined by love, not space. It was like making a movie of a movie song. For a minute, I felt like Adele!

TS I discovered you on the soundtrack while watching *Max Rose* in a theater and was mesmerized not only by the song but by the purity, clarity, and beauty of your voice. With such exquisite film underscoring, I was sorry to see there was

no soundtrack album released. Thankfully, in 2019, you included “Hurry Home” on your *Legrand Affair* deluxe edition.

ME The movie was through-composed, without a full score but with a miraculous use of the “Hurry Home” theme, adapted in a myriad of ways. It’s a gorgeous song, one of Michel’s loveliest late melodies. It was released digitally as a single in 2017, and then I ensured it had a place on the *Legrand Affair* deluxe edition. It has a really lovely Carole King feeling to the piano part, seventies pop. I refused to let that song just pass away into song limbo. I saved it.

I am still hoping to film or perform Legrand tributes, and I will, of course, include “Hurry Home.”

TS In approaching the material for your album devoted to

Now” is a pensive pact between two loving but sundered people, or how “Not While I’m Around” is meant to be a love song to a pie-maker but can be turned into a protective anthem for children everywhere. It helped to define what I was doing. Now my producer tells me the videos have been influential. I’m delighted if such filmed commentary turns out to be a model for other singers. We all should speak up about our art!

If there’s one secret to my singing, I always try to turn every song into a

Stephen Sondheim



Stephen
Sondheim
(Sondheim

Sublime), you deconstructed each song to find its essence and to find your way into it.

ME Yes, I did what we called the “Sixty Second Sondheim” short videos where I talk about what each song means or what it means to me. How “Goodbye for

personal letter to someone or some moment in my life. I find it inside, and then it comes to life. I won’t always say who or why, and sometimes it’s a just-for-the-moment letter, the kind you burn afterwards. But if I’m not writing my own personal postcard to a child or parent or player or friend, then I find it hard to send out to the world.

TS When you were performing as Dot in

Sunday in the Park with George at the Kennedy Center, you had the idea to sing “Color and Light” in a bathtub instead of at a makeup table, the way the show was originally conceived. How did you find the chutzpah to suggest this change to Sondheim?

ME I was an art-history major in college, and I studied many impressionist paintings with nudes in baths, much more than makeup tables. My thought was that Dot would be unashamed and that it would heighten the scene. I wasn’t thinking that it may be risky to suggest a change to Sondheim. Fortunately, he embraced the idea, even altering a lyric or two to match the new setting!

TS What did you wear in the bathtub?

ME Bubbles... and a wig. My microphone and its battery were in the wig. The danger was that I would kick bubbles or a drop of water onto my forehead and ruin the microphone. I turned my head away and took a risk... every night!

TS You have immersed yourself in the music of, respectively, Legrand and Sondheim, with entire albums and shows comprising their work. Is there another songwriter you are contemplating as the focus of a future project?

ME So many! I’d love to do a retrospective album of Kurt Weill’s music. His *Venus in One Touch of Venus* is still maybe my

favorite part. Yip Harburg always touches me. Jobim is never far from my heart, and then I’ve yet to do a really whirlwind album of the American Songbook—just Porter and Gershwin and Arlen and the boys. Everyone’s doing them, but I think there’s room for one that isn’t a bit “nostalgic” or made for easy listening, but really cuts to the emotional urgency of that music. “I Got Lost in His Arms” is as intense as any aria. No wonder our parents all made love to that music. Mine met over “The Man I Love,” my father playing it on the piano. They’re not just songs, they’re the reason a lot of us are

alive. I want to make a record that captures all that erotic and emotional intensity, all that desperate immigrant yearning for a better life, a more perfect America, the golden door. Inside that Morgane Le Fay gown is an Italian girl from Manhasset who arrives in New York on the train each day

begging for a chance to sing and a place to sing in. I’ve sometimes been exasperated by the absurdities of a life on stage, but I’ve never once been bored. I love my work. That can be my epitaph: “She Loved Her Work!”—on the A-side of my tombstone. The B-side can be “Oh, And She’s Still Waiting for Her Tony.” ○

Editor’s Note

Visit melissaerrico.com

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Seeing double.
Melissa with
her portrait
at Sardi's
in NYC