



“I can be myself, sing the way I want to sing and not worry about being the perfect little princess anymore.”

Free to be JANE Monheit

By Allen Morrison ∞ Photography by Timothy Saccenti

Singer Jane Monheit, whose natural beauty requires very little embellishment, is nevertheless wearing more makeup than the occasion demands. Looking up from her smartphone in a bistro near her home on Manhattan's Upper West Side, she offers an apology. "Normally for an interview I wouldn't be so made up," she says. "I don't usually wear false eyelashes." She has just come from an audition for a Broadway musical, she explains, adding, "I won't tell you what it is, because I probably won't get it." She made a quick stop at home to change into jeans, a T-shirt and a gray silk scarf adorned with fuchsia flowers. Even in casual attire, she looks glamorous.

Monheit, 35, is especially radiant these days. She exudes contentment. Happily married to drummer Rick Montalbano, who has been in her band since 2001, she is the proud mother of 4-year-old Jack, now a seasoned traveler who accompanies his parents to concerts and festivals around the world.

She's also never sung better or with more conviction, belying the conventional wisdom that the best art rises from the ashes of misery. Her new album, *The Heart Of The Matter* (Emarcy/Decca), takes big risks, goes for big emotions and cheerfully disregards genre. It was produced and arranged by the formidable arranger/keyboardist Gil Goldstein.

The Broadway audition is a natural extension of Monheit's retro leanings and theatrical flair. Her musical theater ambitions are not surprising, considering the essential conservatism of her approach to jazz.

In an era in which many singers try to define themselves by writing original material, deconstructing familiar songs beyond recognition or blending musical genres, Monheit remains old-school. She's built a catalog of 10 albums by interpreting great tunes, mostly standards, in the tradition of such

jazz singers as Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan and Irene Kral; Broadway icons like Barbara Cook; and Brazilian songbirds such as Elis Regina.

Just like her idols, Monheit starts from a place of respect for the original song. As her longtime accompanist and arranger Michael Kanan puts it, "These days everybody is concerned with doing something 'different.' I don't think that Jane is necessarily trying to find something new. She's trying to find something truthful."

It's ironic that one of the most transporting moments of the new album, which is devoted to lyrical interpretation, is a wordless, soaring vocal improvisation. The inspired scattling comes at the end of Ivan Lins' "A Gente Merece Ser Feliz (People Deserve To Be Happy)," an irresistible samba, and one of two songs on the album by Lins, a frequent collaborator whom she calls her favorite songwriter. As arranged with great panache by Goldstein, Monheit's vocal is supported brilliantly by Brazilian guitarist Romero Lubambo and complemented by two flutes, which, thirds apart, repeat an altered arpeggio that rises and falls like a swimmer bobbing in the surf off Ipanema.

Compared to her previous album, *Home* (Emarcy)—a relaxed romp through a set of road-tested jazz standards—the new project is more ambitious. It also contains less jazz. She calls it her most personal album, reflecting her eclectic musical tastes and, in several standout tracks, her delight in motherhood. Although there are fewer standards than in past outings, the set includes jazz, pop, folk, Brazilian, lullabies and a Broadway tune thrown in for good measure (“I Wanna Be With You” by Charles Strouse and Lee Adams, from the 1964 musical *Golden Boy*).

“Every song was chosen for the lyrics,” she says. The cinematic arrangements are informed by jazz but also draw on traditions as diverse as chanson, Brazilian and chamber music, making ample use of flutes, cellos and Goldstein’s evocative accordion, in addition to Monheit’s longtime band (pianist/arranger Kanan, drummer Montalbano and bassist/arranger Neal Miner). The stylistic diversity includes a Beatles medley (“Golden Slumbers” paired with “The Long And Winding Road”); “Close,” a lovely ballad by Larry Goldings and Cliff Goldmacher; and three lush, Brazilian-inspired arrangements, including one of Joe Raposo’s classic “Sing,” which was featured in the children’s TV series “Sesame Street” and converted into a 1973 pop hit by The Carpenters. The program also has two jazz lullabies, one of which is “Night Night, Stars,” the first song recorded by Monheit for which she wrote both the music and the words.

At the onset of her career, Monheit took flak from some critics who described her as “too perfect,” emphasizing technique over interpretation, but there is scant evidence of that nowadays. Certainly after the new album, in which her voice sometimes breaks with pathos, no one will accuse Monheit again of singing with too little feeling.

“Early on, Jane said she wanted to do songs that were simple and had a lot of emotion in them,” Goldstein said on the phone from Ogden, Utah, where he was touring with Bobby McFerrin. “I think she’s very *present* on the record. Every time I hear it, I feel Jane *figuring out* the song and being in the moment . . . She brings us along, sets up our expectations, then changes her mind or comes in a little after the beat. That’s what makes

a good singer and a great artist—when we feel that process unfolding. We feel that they are in the moment, and they invite us into theirs.”

Between sips of tea, Monheit recalls how she and Goldstein selected the songs. “Gil came to me with a bunch of ideas. It’s funny because they were all songs that I already knew and loved,” including the album’s opener, “Until It’s Time For You To Go,” written by Buffy Sainte-Marie. “I loved Roberta Flack’s [1970] version but hadn’t thought about it in years,” she says.

“Gil also came to me with Bill Evans’ ‘Two Lonely People,’ and I’m an Evans fanatic, so I said, ‘Definitely!’” The song is devastatingly sad, a virtuoso piece that Monheit performs in a stark setting with flutes and Goldstein’s moody electric piano. “There are also songs we play with the band that I’ve wanted to do for a long time,” such as an exceptional reading of Mel Tormé’s “Born To Be Blue.” “That tune does not babysit you!” she says. “You gotta work at it. I really love Mel. Growing up, he was someone I heard constantly.”

Goldstein also suggested a favorite of his, “Little Man, You’ve Had A Busy Day.” “I heard that song on a Sarah Vaughan record when I was about 10,” he said, “and I’ve loved it ever since. Before this, I never found the right person or place to record it.”

Raposo’s “Sing” is a tune that Monheit often croons to her son. “I’ve wanted to do a Brazilian version of it for a million years,” she explains. “And now that I’ve been doing it live, I see a lot of smiles break out when people recognize the tune.” At the suggestion that she might sing it on “Sesame Street,” however, she demurs: “Oh, I wish! I’m not famous enough for ‘Sesame Street.’ But I loved the Lena Horne version when I was a kid, and still do. I’ve played it for my son a thousand times.”

The arrangements are not the only diverse aspect of *The Heart Of The Matter*. “The album runs the gamut of lyrical experiences,” Monheit says. “There are the uplifting songs, like “Sing” and Ivan’s song “Depende De Nós.” Then there are the super-personal songs—‘Until It’s Time For You To Go,’ which is not what it seems, or the song I wrote for my son, ‘Night



IN YET ANOTHER GENRE-DEFYING CHAPTER

Terence Blanchard’s stunning new album, *Magnetic*, features ten original songs written by Blanchard or a member of his exhilarating quintet. *Magnetic* showcases special guest appearances from bass legend Ron Carter, as well as label-mates saxophonist Ravi Coltrane and guitarist Lionel Loueke.



Night, Stars,' or 'Little Man.'"

Monheit and Goldstein also chose to include some darker songs that don't reflect her happy life. "I've been married for 11 years," she reflects. "I have this beautiful child . . . I have a lot of wonderful things in my life to sing about. When you have that sort of happiness, it's easy to extrapolate a little bit and imagine what it would be like if all of those things were gone. And that can take you deeper into the sad songs.

"I also think it's so interesting and fun to play characters here and there. For instance, the recording of 'What Are You Doing The Rest Of Your Life?'—we're doing this incredibly dark

version of the tune," she says, in which the character could be seen as a stalker. "Another song from the record that I have not lived—and hope never to live—is 'Two Lonely People.' I wanted to include these [character songs] as well, instead of having the whole album just be a big old confessional, because I'm boring! I need to get some darkness in there."

Whitney, Bluegrass & Eldridge

Since Monheit began her recording career at the tender age of 20, winning first-runner-up at the 1998 Thelonious Monk International Jazz

Vocals Competition, her voice has been celebrated for a bell-like purity that calls to mind Barbra Streisand, combined with the swing and sophistication of a Sarah Vaughan. She is a marvelous scat singer who can sound like Ella when she so chooses.

Her musical education began at home in Oakdale, on New York's Long Island: "Every day of my life I had jazz, bluegrass and good musical theater, like original cast recordings of Rodgers musicals. And the music of my own generation—oh man, I wore out my Whitney Houston tape. And modern musical theater—Sondheim—I loved *Into The Woods*. I had all of this happening at once, every day." Monheit's parents are music lovers with eclectic tastes; her father is a banjo player who took her to bluegrass shows.

So why didn't she become a bluegrass artist? "I thought about it," she says. "In my teens, really from the time I was born, I knew I was going to be a singer. When I was a little kid, I wanted to be a jazz singer. Then, as a teen, I thought, 'Wouldn't it be cool to be signed with Rounder and make records and have Béla Fleck play on them?' Then I wanted to be on Broadway."

She performed in musical theater in high school but had no private voice lessons until college. "My voice teachers were the records I listened to and sang along with," she says. "My mother made sure that I listened exclusively to singers with good vocal technique—so that, with all my copying, I wouldn't learn problems that would cause trouble later on. I sang along to Ella, Sarah Vaughan, Tormé, Judy Garland. And folk-singers like Joni Mitchell and Maura O'Connell. But I also heard a lot of great musical theater singers like Barbara Cook, Rebecca Luker and Judy Kuhn."

A chance visit to her school by the vocal group New York Voices changed the course of her life, when she met singer Peter Eldridge, her future voice teacher. "I applied to Manhattan School of Music because he was there. I put all my eggs in Peter's basket," she says. "And when I got to college and started lessons with Peter, he said, 'Oh, OK, we're in good shape here.'"

Still, acceptance in New York jazz circles didn't come so easily. "For a long time I was trying to prove myself as a musician with knowledge and ears and the ability to execute all of the stuff I know. You come into New York at 17 as a girl singer, and you run into a lot of 'Oh, your boyfriend is the drummer? Well, OK, I guess she can sing.' I had to win everybody over one by one."

Monheit released her debut disc, *Never Never Land*, in 2000 and followed it up with 2001's *Come Dream With Me*.

"When the records came out, there was a lot of imaging where I was, you know, very glamorous and pretty, and all that." She shrugs. "All that kind of stuff is fun for me. I enjoy that kind of thing. No one had to force me to put on high heels and a pretty dress! But when all that happened, it was still like, 'Oh, well, we bet she's not really any good.' So [I] was proving, proving all the time."

Having a child has relieved some of that pressure and freed her to express herself more. "You

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know how it is," she says. "You have your child, and this is the most important thing in your life. And work becomes secondary. It allows me to say, 'If I sing a bad note, or say the wrong thing in this interview, well, it's just not the end of the world.' I can lighten up, loosen up and be myself, say what I think, onstage and off, sing the way I want to sing, and choose whatever weird song I want to choose. And not worry about being the perfect little princess anymore. It's way more fun. And it's made me a much better singer."

Pianist Kanan agrees: "Over the years, I've seen her get more comfortable at being herself. There's more of her in everything she's singing."

Beautiful Flaws

Although Monheit's vocal technique is still flawless when she wants it to be, she agrees with those who say that sometimes in the past it was a little too polished.

"Yeah, I was a little stiff," she says. "It was scary at the beginning [of my career]. I felt I had to be perfect all the time. I used to worry about every note. I would go back and fix things a million times. Now I'm more worried about the message getting across. I know I can sing perfect notes if I need to. Perfection is kind of boring, isn't it?"

Like many singers in the studio, she will "comp" together takes to address flaws. But she expresses horror at the idea of using Auto-Tune technology for pitch correction: "I would never! If I needed that, I wouldn't be doing my job, now, would I? I mean, if you can't sing in tune—work on it! Don't just rely on a machine to fix it for you. That's ridiculous. Sing in tune, have good time, communicate a lyric. *Bang!* Now you get to be a singer! [Vocalists] get a bad name because of people who have low levels of musicianship."

Monheit is proud of her evolution as a recording artist. She feels she is now better able to bring to the studio more of the spontaneity and feeling she conveys in her live shows. "I've learned how to communicate in the studio the way I can [in concert]. For so long, it was hard for me to record and not worry about sounding perfect. I had to accept the fact that flaws are going to be there. Flaws are there live; flaws are *interesting* and beautiful. And you can't get a truly emotional reading on anything and have it be perfect. Those two things don't really go together."

Monheit no longer has a need to prove herself. "I have gotten to the point where I don't care about being perfect, because I'm a mother, and I'm 35, and I realize how unimportant all of this stuff is," she explains. "Am I singing good songs? Yes. Am I singing them to best of my ability? Yes. Am I emotionally connecting and making people feel something? Hopefully. That's the best that I can do. I don't need to worry about what anybody thinks of me or how they classify me. I've heard people say, 'Aw, no one should do standards anymore,' you know? There's so much fuss all the time about everything—it's silly. I just want to sing good songs and make somebody feel better. That's the point." **DB**

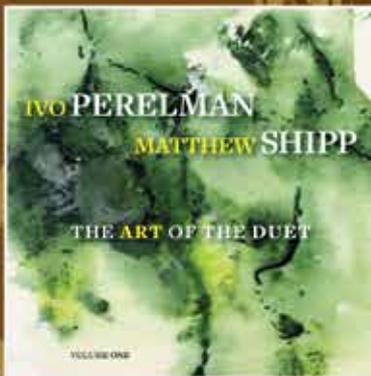
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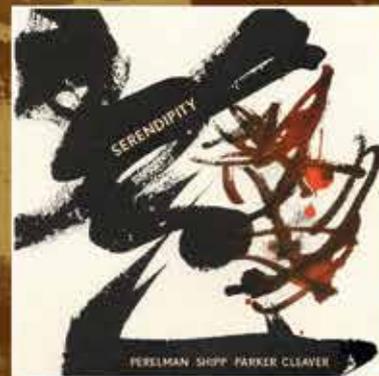
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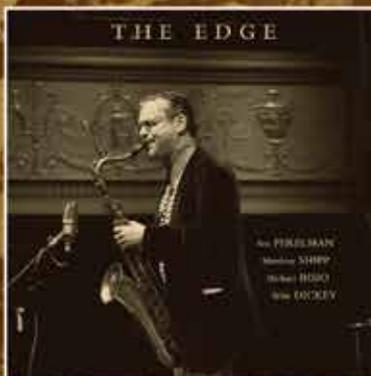
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