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FRANK SINATRA

A 40-Page Spectacular on The Chairman of The Board

Nicole Pasternak

*Nicole Pasternak is a New York-based vocalist, composer, lyricist. She focuses on the Great American Standards, the jazz repertoire, and Brazilian music. Her latest recording, *In A Word*, features Ralph Lalama, Don Friedman, Demis Irwin. Visit Nicole on the internet at www.nicolopasternak.com*

Interview by Jamie Cosnowsky

JJ: What recording or recordings initially sparked your interest in jazz, and inspired your desire to perform and/or compose?

NP: My interest in jazz was sparked by a best friend in high school who had a massive collection of LPs of many early jazz artists, combos and big bands that he turned me onto. I was really struck by the whole Billie Holiday collection, starting with her "Your Mother's Son-in-Law" and "Riffin' the Scotch" with Benny Goodman, right on through Teddy Wilson's band and then leading her own band, all the way through her "Lady In Satin". The combination of Billie's voice and the instruments sounded like natural conversation. I think that resonated with me, the singer taking on a musician's role in the music, versus the "girl in the front" treatment. So for me it became not only about learning the melody and the lyrics, but familiarizing myself and memorizing the instrumental lines and arrangement parts. It added a whole new dimension to singing for me. I latched on to singers like Anita O'Day, Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, Betty Carter and Mark Murphy, not to mention the singer/songwriters of my generation, like Joni Mitchell and Laura Nyro. My older brother Vincent is a musician and he turned me onto the Brazilian stuff, too, so back then it was also Astrud Gilberto and Jobim. I played records over and over till it seemed every part was committed to memory—to this day, I can still replay some of those records back in my mind. Through my youth I had studied violin, piano, guitar and mandolin, but by high school I was out front singing lead vocals. I was a part of the local music scene, both in school and out. There was the high school jazz band and on our own, a nine-piece band with rhythm section and horns where we did a lot of cover tunes. It was nice to work with a horn section, always. When it came time for college, I went abroad for a year. A whole year in Paris. It was incredible. Not only did I get involved in music, I learned a lot about life and what it means to listen to the "music" of language. It opens up your ears and your mind to live somewhere so far away and unfamiliar. Immersing myself in the street scene, I sang in the metro and little jazz clubs...it was a very exciting, far out experience. I returned to the

states and soon after set out for the West Coast, where I spent three years. I got into a nice music scene with a bunch of Brazilian cats in San Francisco. I hooked up with a really talented young guitarist, too, who was working out the American jazz standards. That's where my earliest professional gigs happened. When I came back home to the East, I continued gigging and growing my repertoire. I met and married a really fine bassist, George Sheck. We started a family and formed our own band. We were quite busy on the Connecticut scene—a really memorable moment was getting to open for Max Roach at the New Haven Jazz Festival. These were the beginning years of my professional career. You ask about the inspiration to compose. The first hint of it had come at the tail end of my year in Paris in 1976, when I wrote "Parisian Dream". The music came first, and I knew some day the words would come. The lyrics did come in a flood, a dozen years later when I was well into motherhood! I was busy with family and gigging, but I took some time to study music theory, and it was about this time that lots of ideas started coming through. I am not a composer, per se, because I never received any formal music training to write. Usually I just hear a melody and a good chunk of lyrics comes with it. I have to sit down with a bona fide musician, and they help me get it down on paper so it can be played. Anyway, pretty soon there was a whole album's worth of songs, and we released "Winter Samba" in 1987. Through the years I've written maybe a couple dozen tunes, two or three of them inspired by Billie Holiday. Another one that has done pretty well for me, I worked out with (pianist/composer/arranger) Mike Holober, is called "Don't Go, Don't Leave, Please Stay". It was the title cut on one of my CDs. I've since performed and recorded it with a big band arrangement by Dave Lalama. Other musicians have called on me to write lyrics for their tunes, too. I was grateful I got to write lyrics for a tune by the late jazz gui-

tarist Joe Puma, and again for Mike Holober. I worked on co-writing some children's material too, during the 90s, with my friend Cary "C.J." Masters. When I was invited to be the vocalist on Charles Haynes CD, *Paris Rio Express*, I got to write my own lyrics for "Nuages" by Django Reinhardt—English words that is. I have a real love of words and language, so writing lyrics for me is a really rewarding challenge. For lyric-writing exercise, I've written a number of lyrics for "Real Book" tunes. Tunes like "Moment's Notice", "Nica's Dream", "Sky Dive", "Blue Bossa" and "Recordame". Ha-ha. I used to kid and say someday I'll do a project called, "Nicole Sings The Real Book".

JJ: Talk about the relevance of developing a healthy curiosity about ideas and people, in and out of music, in bolstering your artistry.

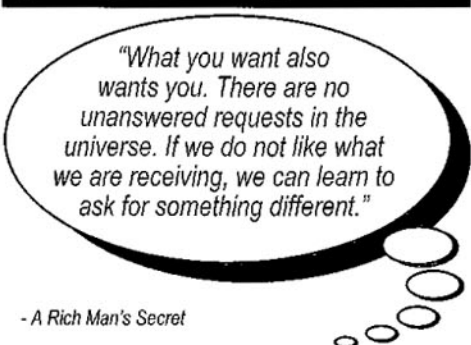
NP: Music is all about ideas and people, so I don't know what kind of musician one can be



without a healthy curiosity about such things, and I believe I was just born that way, or nurtured. I came from a large family where you learn to understand from an early age that it's not just about you in this world. My dad was a real people person. I watched how fair and friendly he was with everyone, treating people always with respect. My mom was a teacher, a strict but loving teacher. She taught us to never stop reaching out to learn new things. After raising seven kids and being a schoolteacher for 25 years, she still kept going, traveling to the four corners of the world to study and learn, right up until her final days. I'm what some people might call a news-aholic: I am more inclined to follow current events than the current charts; I love to travel, to learn of other people and places, to study history, language and culture. How does all this bolster my artistry? I believe it gives me perspective, puts my life in greater context, and keeps my ego in check. The voice is arguably the oldest instrument. It has been used to comfort, inform and inspire mankind through the ages. That's a pretty deep connection to have with people, from ancient times to current times. What bolsters me is that I have been blessed with a chance to share in this heritage, and I am just a speck in time. In music, there's this magic place where all that's ever been and all that ever will be comes together, when the band is breathing together, conspiring in a moment to reach some great universal ear, like a collective consciousness, and time seems to almost stand still. In the ideal, everything exists in the present; the performer is not using the music to express their individual self so much as they let the music use them to express *itself*. That's artistry. I think Louis Armstrong is a good example of someone who was the king of this. The magic just poured out of him.

JJ: Could you discuss the relevance for you as an artist, to approach this music as a road to be traveled, with the opportunity for a lifetime of growth and learning, as opposed to a destination to be reached?

NP: I think the very nature of this music dictates a long road to be traveled. The whole process has a way of letting you know how little you know. I think it's helpful to create goals or milestones along the way to keep your spirit engaged. One form of progress that you can measure is building a repertoire, for example. You simply can't help but learn and grow all through



"What you want also wants you. There are no unanswered requests in the universe. If we do not like what we are receiving, we can learn to ask for something different."

- A Rich Man's Secret

your life if you're learning tunes. Sometimes you get inspired about a particular composer, or you immerse yourself in a certain artist to hear their language and get it in your ear. All this gets taken in and then gets expressed when you get out and perform again. Another important thing for me is to attend live performances as often as possible. That's absolutely my favorite setting for jazz, and it absolutely feeds my soul. I am more or less a bread-and-butter singer. I have been blessed with a busy day-to-day schedule so I really get the chance to grow in the live setting, getting to interact with the audience and the people, which I totally live for. It keeps my life energized. People sometimes say to me, "You know, you should be famous!" And I say, "Well, I AM famous—with a few people!" For me, the road I've traveled has had several stops along the way. How's this for a list of lifetime milestones? When I was young it was about imitation, then emulation, then inspiration, then jubilation, and along the way a whole lot of humiliation. I certainly hope all this leads me to my *destination*, in the end! Everybody knows it's all about the journey anyway.

JJ: What are some of the challenges you face and expect to face as an artist, as an independent artist, and how do you envision making them work for you?

NP: The challenges I face are basic: being able to grow as an artist while I still have to make a living for myself and my family. That's why I work a day job. This leads to a second challenge: being taken seriously as an artist—either by others or by my own self, for that matter. Also, people think that if you work days that music is just something you "do for fun," like a recreational past-time. I just explain to people that I work two jobs, like most Americans I know, who either work two jobs or one job, way more than 40 hours a week. As an independent artist, it's just me and the work. Without a business support system all the gigs I do come from my own making or by word of mouth recommendations. It's all on me to promote myself and my fellow musicians. And just keep going and going, and do the best I can. How such challenges work for me is that in the meantime I've been able to carve out a decent little career for myself where I get to work with lots of wonderful musicians and I sing for lots of wonderful people.

JJ: How have you strived to develop your own voice - in the face of the immense influence of certain overwhelmingly influential artists?

NP: At one point in my earlier days I had dreams of grandeur, when I was part of a successful regional [Connecticut] act with steady engagements and buzz about us. I think because I was young and foolish and thinking business-wise I would push my voice in a more commercial direction - if that's the kind of influence you're talking about. But then I started to grow up musically. I got the chance to work with some great New York musicians like John Hart, Joe Magnarelli, Pete Malinverni, Vernel Fournier

and Ralph Lalama. I grew more dissatisfied with myself and my sound. I began to focus on reigning in my sound, relaxing the voice and creating a more conversational tone. My aim was to let my voice come out, not shove it out the door. At the same time I also pushed myself more towards improvisation as an expression of me, not just to be a copy-cat. When it comes to the overwhelmingly influential artists, I look to them for inspiration. I try to glean the individual beauty of each one; think of amazing singers like Ella, Etta Jones, Billie, Carmen, Sarah, and now the reigning queen, Dianne Reeves. I heard her live at Newport Jazz, and I kid you not when I tell you my tears flowed the entire time. My insecurities in light of the greats can make me feel small, but I believe they'd be the first ones to give me a kick in the pants and say, "Keep going." Ultimately, my aim is to reach people on a one-on-one basis. The intimacy of day-to-day relating to a live, intimate audience has taught me a lot about life and people, and they give me something back that affects me personally. The human voice, whether singing or speaking, is a result of the life we live. So what I give you is where I am on any given day.

JJ: How if at all do the pressures of talent buyers, peers and the marketplace affect your music or creativity?

NP: Marketplace pressures can be daunting and discouraging. It's hard to be compared to others when what I'm experiencing is so personal. I am not a competitive type; I just want to do my thing and encourage others to do theirs. One thing that bothered me was the comment that a talent agent once made when he learned I had just turned 30 years old. He said, "Oh, forget it, you're already too old." That was really discouraging to hear—basically to hear, well, don't even bother trying. And a very prominent critic wrote an article about how singers these days were challenged to find new material, that they just kept re-mining and rehashing the Great American Standards. I wondered if he'd say the same thing about trumpeters or pianists or saxophonists. I thought that was pretty unfair, and discouraging. On the other hand, I try not to worry about them. I have enough internal pressures affecting me.

JJ: Could you talk about some experience that you have had that has helped you become more sensitive to others and has correspondingly contributed to your artistic growth?

NP: Becoming a mother helped me mature and grow more sensitive to others. Falling in and out of love, as well, has always been grist for the creative mill. Participating in volunteer organizations also inspires the creative spark because you're trying to find solutions to the world's problems so you're reaching for ways to inspire yourself and others.

JJ: If you could magically get your wish in the next three years, what goal—action or event—would you hope to accomplish, and what is the

emotional core of that goal (i.e. the driving force: A desire for fame? Wealth? Helping people? Creating? etc.)?

NP: Okay, this is a great question, but I get three wishes, right? Part of my wish is already starting to come true. I'm going back into the studio to finally record tunes I've had on the shelf for years, some jazz material, some not. I'm working with Scott Freiman at Garagista Music, and we're going to take them one step at a time. Maybe it will result in a whole new kind of project for me, but the core goal is to accomplish something substantial this year, so I can get these tunes into some kind of arrangement. I'd like to work with my husband, Ralph [Lalama] more and create more of our sound together. The voice and tenor sax is a very compatible blend. We've worked out a number of arrangements, too; I'd like to expand upon what we started with our last recording together, *In A Word*, and expand the band and instrumentation, but have our sound together as the core. It would be great to get back to Europe, this time on tour together! I'd like to see a recording of the Lalama Brothers. My brother-in-law, Dave Lalama, aside from being a really talented pianist with a gift for working with vocalists, is also an enormously gifted arranger and conductor. I got to go on the road with the Lalama Brothers to Reading, Pennsylvania, where we performed Dave's arrangements for combination big band and chamber orchestra. This ultimately led us to another concert on a llama farm; Nicole Pasternak & The Lalama Brothers on a llama farm. It's true. You can't make this stuff up. My final wish would be to connect with people wherever possible through this music, because the driving force is helping people. That is my favorite aim; helping people out brings me the greatest feeling in life. I know that sounds corny, but it's true. That's why Ralph always kids about it when he introduces me onstage; he calls me "The Shirley Temple of Jazz."

JJ: What is it that you have observed that inspires audiences about your performances and music?

NP: People tell me my attitude on stage is energetic and contagious to them. They say that they feel good watching me engaged in the music; it engages them, too. In more intimate settings I like to make eye contact with the audience. I can't always do it because with certain songs I get too emotional and lose my voice to tears. But most of the time I manage to make eye contact so I am singing directly to them. People respond to this positively because now they are invited in to what's taking place on the bandstand...and thus they are part of the music.

JJ: We all love to get compliments for what we do well. How do you take responsibility for what doesn't work, and how do you make changes or turn things around. Could you cite an example?

NP: An example of what doesn't work for some people in my audience (as a singer) is they want

to hear more of the vocals; that all that solo space for the musicians starts to get them away from the essence of my lyric performance. It's a risk I took when I chose not to live in the canary seat, so to speak; I never wanted to be that chick in front of the band, but that chick *in* the band, like Anita O'Day. Anyway, this is the kind of feedback I've gotten on occasion. "We came to hear *you*." So over time I've tried to make adjustments by stretching out a bit longer up front, sticking with the written lyrics and improvising or even sometimes with all-out lyric improvisation as opposed to scat improvisation. That's a real challenge; when you're doing it the audience knows that it's not something written out and rehearsed, you're totally winging it on the spot and you might be making something up based on something happening in the room at that very moment. Another adjustment is to trade with musicians onstage to highlight the musical conversation. When the audience gets in on that, they start to hear voices beyond the singer's. And that's cool.

JJ: What are the benefits and drawbacks of being an independent artist?

NP: The drawbacks are you're on your own, business-wise. You have to drum up your own gigs and it's harder to be taken seriously without the rep of a label, agent or manager presenting you professionally. It's harder to get your foot in the door when there are so many other independent artists all vying for the same few gigs out there, or the limited jazz airwaves out there. If you want to make a record, you have to carry all the costs and that can be limiting, too. On the plus side, you have ultimate control over what goes on with any given project. And you get to pursue your musical life independently, on your own terms and in your own time. You don't have to get involved in the meat-grinding aspects of the business where people are being constantly rated and compared and all that stuff that's hard to live with, for me anyway. Independence means you can go out in public and not be bothered by anyone; nobody's writing nasty things about you in the press, hopefully. And nobody's trying to make you be somebody you're not. Recently I've been lucky to work with a sweet little Indy label, Garagista Music, formed in late 2001 to collect and feature all kind of musical artists in my locale, the Rivertowns area, just north of New York City. Garagista helped me in launching my last CD, *In A Word*, via their web site. They got me hooked up with the download scene, too, and now some of my out-of-print material is accessible again, thanks to them.

JJ: Tell us about your activities outside of music and how they have helped you stay balanced, and contribute to your personal and artistic growth?

NP: I'm keenly interested in world news; it helps me to keep my mind thinking globally, so I follow the foreign news as well as domestic. My husband and I enjoy following politics, and we love to debate the current issues. I enjoy walk-

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ing, too, though I certainly don't do it enough. I love to spend time with family and friends. I really love to read, non-fiction mostly. I think all these things lead to balance and growth in my life. I have to mention here, although it's not an activity outside of music but it's one of the key contributing factors to my personal and artistic growth: being involved in the jazz community, starting with my husband, Ralph Lalama, who through his example has taught me so much about life and this music we call jazz. He has such a love and dedication to the jazz ideal, and the chops to prove it. But Ralph really keeps the whole thing very grounded, beautiful and real. Just hearing him play, practice or teach his students, I learn a lot just by being around that. There's a community of jazz singers and musicians that have become like my extended family. They have really empathized and supported me in my lifetime. This really hit home one night at Cornelia Street Café [NYC] when I got to join my friend, the amazing Judi Silvano, on one of her jazz singers' nights there. And one of my best friends and beautiful singer Jody Sandhaus did it, too. We each did our own program but then Judi had us join in together - then Judi's husband, Joe Lovano, came on with his soprano sax, and then my husband, Ralph, on his tenor sax and Jody's husband, Pete Malinverni was already at the piano. And we were all blowin' and jammin' and I turned around and thought to myself, "Wow, dig this, jazz couples' night out on the bandstand!" I guess what helps us all grow is the sound of each other.

JJ: Are there any words of advice you'd like to offer young jazz artists?

NP: I was blessed to receive sage advice from others that I'd merely like to pass along: Try to take every gig opportunity, even if it seems illogical at the time; it can lead you to the best lifetime friends and associations you'll ever make in music. Try always to acknowledge an acknowledgement you receive from a fan. Lastly, to the young women, remember the soulful words of the great James Brown: "This is a man's world, but it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl."

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"Ultimate success is not directly related to early success, if you consider that many successful people did not give clear evidence of such promise in youth."

- Robert Fritz, *The Path of Least Resistance*