**A Biography of Kelsey Jillette**

**By Mark Kirby of Musicdish.com**



With a musical landscape chock full of female singers, the thing that gets your interest is some special quality that can't be measured in sharps and flats. Call it pizzazz, personality, or the content of one's character. Whatever it is, this elusive quality is what makes one's ears perk up and take notice. Kelsey Jillette has this quality.

It comes across in a breathy, natural voice- conversational, but full of intensity and with loud bouts of joy, humor, pathos, and the blues. It is found in the expressiveness with which she sings every word, every line of a song. While she can use her voice in a Dianne Reeves style scat-singing mode, she also delivers a smooth, emotionally nuanced expression of a song's melody. This is perfectly in keeping with her live performance style: Jillette favors relating to the audience with the unpretentious naturalism of the girl next door over the pompous grandiosity of the diva.

This comes in part from the path Kelsey Jillette has taken to become a singer-musician. “I’ve been singing since I was a young kid,” she states. I learned ‘Lush Life,’ (the Billy Strayhorn classic) around the age of 10 from a Linda Ronstadt tape. My dad let me use his tape recorder to record myself singing Whitney Houston covers when I was 11 or 12."

Throughout her early years as a singer, Ms. Jillette almost never performed in public. Singing was something that she loved but never felt brave enough to pursue. While attending Brown University, she dabbled in many subjects before settling on studying theater. “I had a lot of stage fright and social awkwardness that theater classes helped. I had to sing ‘La Seguidilla’, an aria from the opera Carmen, and [the maudlin classic] ‘Send in the Clowns’ in front of a class, and my knees literally knocked, but I discovered a kind of power, too."

The experience led her towards a focus on singing and music. Fast forward to the year 2002 when she met her primary musical collaborator, Tom Abbott, and began performing with him and various other players in her new hometown of New York City. At that point, she had a revelation: “I knew I wasn't going to make it very far with no understanding of music theory, and that talent didn't mean beans without some serious training.” She enrolled in the New School University Jazz Program from which she received a degree and, more importantly, valuable education and hands-on experience creating music.

Since then she has recorded two children’s albums for the Barcelona-based children’s workshop, Dansasi, and several independent releases with her trio and quartet. She has spent 8 years paying dues, performing in and around New York City with her combo, The Kelsey Jillette Group, Tom Abbott’s Big Bang Big Band and a variety of other, smaller groups. She has toured Spain twice, headlining at some of Catalonia’s most important jazz clubs. The creative fruits of these experiences can be found on her recent album "The Water is Wide” (CAP 1016).

She starts out the CD showcasing the standard, bottom line skill that anyone associated with jazz must have: the ability to swing like hell. The cut “Turn out the Stars” is a straightforward jazz tune, where she lets the song almost play itself as she inhabits the melody and infuses it with genuine feeling, thus making this Bill Evans tune her own. She is supported by Tom Abbott on saxophone, Brad Whiteley on organ, Adam Pache on drums and Hiro Honma on the guitar. Whiteley’s organ on this track, and throughout the CD, is truly classic, with a welcome emphasis on the low end. His rumbling bass work is part of the signature sound of this record and offers Ms. Jillette ample cushion for her voice.

“This Can’t Be Love” is another swinging jazz cut with the kind of creative twist she brings to many cuts on the recording. The song starts with a rubato vocal intro over an organ drone, where she elongates each word and note of melody before kicking into a tasty swing. The ways she riffs and tweaks the melody makes the listener see the smile on her face.

Perhaps it was having to overcome stage fright that accounts for Kelsey’s ability to relate so naturally and unguardedly to her audience. That touch of vulnerability helps bridge the gap between Ms. Jillette and the listener. This is especially evident at her live shows. It also helps her put across the emotions and nuances of the lyrics that she sings. “I love the harmonic freedom, the rhythm and the challenge of jazz,” says Kelsey. “However, I've always been struck by how well pop and folk singers put across a story when they sing. With that in mind, I try to sing the American songbook's well-worn lyrics truthfully and plainly. The singers who move me are compelling storytellers and tend to be outside of jazz; artists like Jeff Buckley, Bonnie Raitt, Stevie Wonder, and Mercedes Sosa, among others. In jazz, Carmen McRae is one of my biggest influences. Now there is a jazz singer who really sings a lyric!”

The title track, “The Water is Wide" is another example of Ms. Jillette's artistry. This song is a perfect mix of gospel, jazz, and pop. It starts out with the Scottish folk tune, full of pathos and longing. After singing the words, she riffs off the wordless melody to Dizzy's Con Alma, answered by Abbott's sax. Her broad eclecticism is further shown on "Manha de Carnaval."  On this Brazilian classic she showcases both her versatility and signature style, with a sensual Portugese vocal that recalls Brazilian chanteuse Elis Regina, lilting over a kinky reggae groove. She applies this same conceptual inventiveness and playfulness on "Honeysuckle Rose."  Unlike so many singers who do an old sawhorse tune in the familiar rote way, Ms. Jillette adds a little twist to this old standard.  The song starts off with a funky offbeat waltz and seamlessly slides into a hard swinging groove.  Here Jillette adds some tasteful scat singing, truly emulating a horn.

Kelsey Jillette's music, while thoroughly steeped in classic American jazz, transcends genres that in past eras were not viewed as contradictory.  "I sing the songs I feel like singing, because I get a feeling for both the words and the music. Sometimes one is better than the other; ideally both are compelling." This organic process in finding and connecting to the music has resulted the CD “The Water is Wide”, an eclectic new record that has swing, gospel, pop, bebop, and both traditional and ‘funkified’ versions of great jazz songs.

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