



FEATURES — 4 DAYS AGO

Q&A with Jo Lawry: Discovery, Mastery and the Necessity of Wonder

by BRIAN ZIMMERMAN



Australian-born, New York-based vocalist Jo Lawry's released her debut album, *I Want To Be Happy*, to tremendous critical acclaim, setting the course for a career that would traverse genres from jazz to pop and everything in between. The album, released in 2008 while Lawry was earning her doctorate in music from New England Conservatory, was a powerful statement of vocal precision and sophisticated harmonic sense.

Outside of the jazz world, Lawry may be best known for her work with pop sensation Sting, with whom she has been recording and touring since 2009. In fact, it was her stalwart work with Sting that was featured in the Oscar-winning 2013 documentary *20 Feet from Stardom*. More recently, Lawry has performed with Paul Simon and Peter Gabriel.

On November 13, Lawry is scheduled to appear at the University of Miami as part of the [Frost Music Live! Signature Series](#), which pairs internationally renowned jazz and pop performers with students from the university's esteemed Frost School of Music. (JAZZIZ is a sponsor of Frost Music Live! Readers who purchase a [ticket package](#) and use the promo code **JAZZ18** will receive a complimentary 3-month subscription to JAZZIZ. Click [here](#) for details.)

JAZZIZ Magazine spoke with Lawry ahead of her appearance in Miami to discuss her approach to songwriting and the upcoming release of her new album, *The Bathtub and the Sea*.

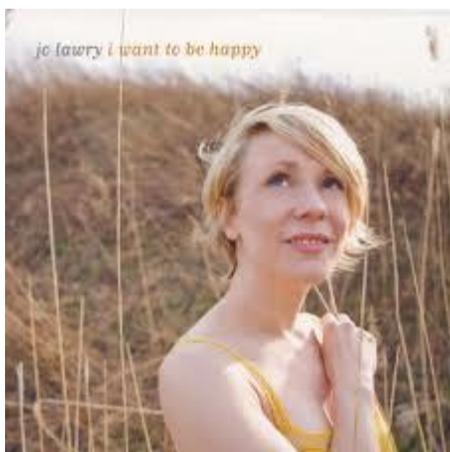
It's been 10 years since the release of your debut album, *I Want To Be Happy*.

It's been a while, yes (*laughs*).

And now you have a new album coming out later this year, *The Bathtub and the Sea*.

That's right. It's going to be officially released on November 9, so the performance in Miami is practically a CD release party (*laughs*)

It also sets up a nice opportunity to follow your career over the course of a decade. Looking back, what have you learned — personally, professionally, artistically — since the recording of that debut album?



Well, at the time of making that album I was in the process of finishing up the coursework part of my doctorate in musical arts, so I was still very much in the school world. And I think that my academic approach to singing is somewhat reflected in that record — and not necessarily in a bad way. There's some complex scating, sophisticated harmonies, that kind of thing. I think I was really still delving into how far I could go into the music I was being *taught* how to make.

In the albums that followed, I think I've been exploring the type of music that I'd like to *listen to*, as opposed to the music that I *studied*. They aren't necessarily the same. *The Bathtub and the Sea* is all original music, with some co-writes. And it's really very lyric oriented, very story driven. There's a lot more emotion and meaning than technique and calisthenics.

There was probably something I wanted to prove with *I Want To Be Happy*: “I can hang!” you know? There were boxes I wanted to check, and I worked really hard to do those things, so I wanted to show them off. I’ve sort of learned some restraint now. You don’t have to reveal everything you’ve learned all the time. You can be yourself and sing a three-chord folk song, and it will have even more meaning.

How far back does your musical education go? Was your household a musical one growing up?

We were a church family, so there were a lot of hymns, a lot of religious music. I’m one of five kids, and all of us learned instruments. Most of us played two instruments, and my parents were pretty strict about practicing. But my brother, who’s 13 years older, was really into jazz, and he was the one who sat me down at the piano and had me sing “Puff the Magic Dragon” with all these reharmonized voicings. It was really good ear training (*laughs*). But more importantly, it got me really excited about music. He was always playing me the latest records that he bought and asking me what I liked about it. So while I always loved music and singing, I credit my brother with pulling me into the jazz side of things.

Which instruments did you play as a kid?

Mostly piano and violin.

And how about the guitar? You’ve played it on a number of albums. When did you first pick it up?



Photo by Sandrine Lee

You know, I didn't actually start playing guitar until I was almost 30. One of the reasons that I love playing guitar is because I'm so naive on the instrument, which means that every time I have a guitar in my hands, there's this sense of discovery and wonder. I don't rely on the harmony that I've learned or the rules of composition. It's just plunking my fingers down like some kind of musical explorer. That child-like approach to music is something that I'm constantly trying to maintain. It's wonderful and important to train and study, but it's important also not to lose the wonder and naivete of making music. It's a limitless pursuit.

One of the people that really brought that idea home to me was [pianist] Danilo Pérez. Now, we all know he's got chops that are just *beyond* good. But his approach to music is just like that of a child. Every time he sits down at a piano, it's like he's seeing it for the first time, like *Whoa! What does this do? Let me find out!* He's somebody who can do anything technically, but he's just as interested in seeing what he could play with one finger, the way a child would.

When did you make the leap from covering other people's songs to writing your own?

I've been interested in writing songs since I was a teenager. I never played them to anyone else, but when I was about 18, I had a song that I had written for a boyfriend who was a musician, and a bit more of an advanced one than I was. I got up the courage to play him this song and ... it didn't make much of an impact at all! (*laughs*) I felt so embarrassed that I didn't write anything after that for about another decade. It felt too raw, and I was scared that somebody would laugh at it or say it wasn't good.

Then two things happened. One is that I went through a breakup that made me want to explore what I was feeling and write about myself. The other one was working with Sting, who I watched kind of pick up instruments on the fly — like the theremin or the harmonica — without any fear of embarrassment. And I mean, if you're Sting and you're on stage in front of 125,000 people and you're going out on the limb to play an instrument you're not entirely proficient in, that takes some chutzpah. But it didn't matter, because that's the kind of musician he is. He's a forever student. So one day I said to him, "You know, I wish I would have started guitar 10 years ago." To which he replied, "Why can't you start it now?" He lent me one of his guitars and he never let me give it back. And that became the guitar that I wrote all my songs on. They just started to pour out.



Photo by Shervin Lainez

The other thing that significantly helped my songwriting was joining a song club, in which somebody would send out a title on Sunday and you had to write and record and upload a song to that title by Thursday. The two elements of a deadline and a kernel of an idea that was more than just a blank page — that just got me off to the races. It was such a relief to finally experience the notion that I could just write something for the sake of it, that it didn't need to be perfect. I just needed to do the work.

As you were honing your songwriting skills, who were some of the lyricists you really admired?

Randy Newman is somebody that I adore. I can't get over how direct and elemental his writing is, the plain-spokenness of it. I'm always amazed at how *basic* his lyrics can be. He's obviously got some complexity, but a hook like "Baby, it's so hard, so hard, so hard living without you" just cuts right to the heart.

Paul Simon was another big influence, especially the way he would take left turns and come out of nowhere with a lyric. You can't even put your finger on why some of his lyrics work in his songs, but they are still so necessary.

And then there's James Taylor and Sting and Joni Mitchell — all the obvious ones. But then also some younger people like Becca Stevens, who is someone I absolutely adore. She's a significant voice and a significant writer, and I'm always excited to hear the next thing she puts out.

Your background work with Sting was featured in the documentary *20 Feet From Stardom*. What was it like to see your life re-contextualized as part of this much larger narrative about the music industry?

I was relieved when I saw it, because I was worried it was going to be a horrifying experience (*laughs*). Morgan Neville, whose brainchild this film was, is a wonderful documentarian, which meant that he didn't have any preconceptions about what the film was going to be from the beginning. So the thread that goes through the film, which is now fairly obvious, wasn't obvious to him at the outset.

One of the possibilities, at first, was this idea of "How does life on the road affect your home life?" And at the time, I was going through some pretty tumultuous stuff. So in actuality, we did many shots together over the course of a year, and he was — as much as I was trying to obscure it — watching my life unravel before his very eyes. And I was really afraid that my life would be laid bare in this documentary.

Apparently, I was a fairly large part of the original edit. But after the focus group, it became clear that I was part of an entirely different narrative, and I got a call from Morgan saying that they had discovered a different thread, about these incredibly talented women who stand just barely out of the spotlight. And I thought, "Thank God!" I was honestly super relieved, and just really proud to have been a part of it. I loved seeing what happened to Lisa [Fischers's] solo career as a result of this movie, because she's such a tremendous singer and musician. Darlene [Love], too. I'm so glad this movie has had a positive effect on their careers.

You'll be conducting several masterclasses and workshops as part of your appearance at Frost Music Live! What are some lessons you like to instill in aspiring vocalists in the jazz and pop vein?

One of the things I like to drive home is that nothing is wasted. At any stage of your education or professional life, there will be experiences, classes and gigs that are not what you would have designed for yourself. It can be frustrating to think about how time consuming or inconsequential these things might be for your career. I'm always really surprised to find that the things I've spent time on — whether by choice or not — have always come in handy later on. I've always found a use for them. It's like a big toolbox that I carry around, and sometimes I don't even remember that a particular tool is in there until I really need it. I mean, who would have thought that my singing in the Adelaide Girls Choir would end up with me singing in Madison Square Garden with Sting and Paul Simon. It was a hard but absolutely crucial step in my journey. Things are always useful when you choose to explore it with that "wonder" of a lifelong learner.

Feature photo by Sandrine Lee.