

Nancy Wilson Interview Conducted by Stuart Nicholson: 5th November 2002

Q: We seem to have entered into an era where jazz singers are enjoying quite a bit of popularity, people like Diana Krall, Jane Mondheidt, Norah Jones and so on...

NW: At least we're hearing their names, that's good

Q: So why do you think that is?

NW: I Have no idea, I don't have a clue [laughs]. Well, marketing, let's face it, a record company markets it, and if it's marketed properly then you'll get airplay and then you get recognition, a recording company has to be interested in spending some money to get it out there

Q: What we all notice about these young singers is they are singing the Great American Songbook, in the tradition

NW: Yeah, yeah

Q: But you have also kept up to date

NW: I still sing the standards, I have always done so, I'm *still* doin' the same thing! Basically the good ballads, I'm always looking for that, and my live shows always consist of familiar material

Q: I was looking at *If I Had My Way*, there's a couple...

NW: That was specially for an urban market, but that's one of the few you'll find like that

Q: So when you shape up your repertoire, what are you looking for

NW: It depends what the album is about, I'm going for a specific thing and that was one of the few 'Urban' things I have done, and have wanted to do, so they know where it is, the market makers, I'm really tired of hearing 'what label,' I'm tired of boxes, yeah! When I first started my music was the 'pop music' of the day, so as you grow and you get older, people keep changing who you are, to them. I haven't changed anything, I have always sang R&B, I have always sang pop and R&B

Q: You said when you started out — that was *Like In Love* with Cannonball Adderley

NW: *Live in Love* — Cannonball was four albums later!

Q: OK, well how did that relationship with Cannonball Adderley come about?

NW: I knew Cannonball before I started recording, he was managed by the man I wanted to manage me, and so he came to my home town, I met him, the band i was working with the bandleader introduced me to Cannon so we talked frequently. So when I went to New York he was one of the few people I knew, so he knew I wanted to talk with the management so I had a place to work within a matter of weeks, he told John [Levy] I was there, John already knew about me

Q: John Levy the bass player, right?

NW: Yes, he's still my manager

Q: I didn't realise he's still around

NW: He's 90

Q: Those albums, jazz was the popular music of its day, and *then* it was standards

NW: Right, but I was not labelled a jazz singer when I started recording, no, pop, I was not listed as jazz, I wasn't listed as jazz, neither was Peggy Lee *then*. It's all perception..

Q: Rationalisation with hindsight!

Q: Right. As your career developed, in the 1970s it was all electric

NW: I had more electric than anything I had in the 1970s, I did one thing with Larry Farrell, in Japan I did some electric with Makihito Satu (sp?) — we did a whole album together, can't remember the name of it! [laughs] Right now, talking about it I have some 60 or more albums, at least 65, can't remember all of them!

Q: In the 1980s I remember an album you did with Chick Corea

NW: *Echoes of an Era*

Q: Yes, you seemed to come back to jazz with that

NW: I've only had two albums that could be considered jazz, that was *Echoes of an Era* and the Cannonball album.

Q: And with George Shearing?

NW: The Shearing album could go either way. *Echoes of an Era* — we did it live, we went to New York and did it at the Savoy, and then went back to the West Coast in the blizzard of '84, I remember that well, we were fortunate to get back to California and record it there, but I can't remember the ins and outs of how I came to do it, they had done *Echoes of an Era 1* with Sh? but I can't remember who called who, or how it came about, but it was fun! I love Stanley [Clarke] but it was difficult making it because the blizzard, travel and stuff, we had a hard time getting to the

live performance that night but we made it! One you get there you're fine, but getting there was the problem

Q: You mentioned your career on albums in Japan, so how important was the Japanese market to you

NW: I recorded every year, because I recorded for a Japanese label, they were imported into the States, many albums, and it kept my records out there, so it worked for me. There's a period in time — it's amazing to me that Columbia records has no jazz division, I mean, the home of Miles and Wynton, I mean — how can they not have a jazz division? Really, it's been tragic, then the very fact that the Monterey Jazz festival is in trouble and may not be able to find sponsorship, it's amazing to me.

Q: So how has this affected you

NW: I was never a jazz singer, I was never labelled a jazz singer, I never worked jazz rooms, I worked the major supper clubs in the world, as opposed to jazz rooms, so i didn't have to go through that, I mean — if you live long enough and you're black you'll be called a jazz singer! I don't care what you think you are!! [laughs]

Q: You're not supposed to say things like that [laughs]!

NW: But it's true! I'm not embarrassed about it all [laughs] But think about it, the supper clubs are gone, there are no rooms left to play

Q: You play Las Vegas though

NW: I still play Las Vegas, but not jazz rooms, they're no jazz rooms there, are there? But yes, I do play Las Vegas, I'll be there in December, these are concerts, not clubs

Q: Your audience wants good songs sung well

NW: Yes, but my point is as a [jazz] singer, the label could hurt you monetarily — financially — I mean, eventually if you want to play the rooms, you can play the rooms, but it wasn't where I wanted to be then, I would have stayed there, but as it was I was able to — I can sing what I want, across the board, I can play the Coconut Grove, the Waldorf Astoria, but I can also play the Village Vanguard and Basin Street East, but if I had *only* played the Village Vanguard, Basin Street East, the Jazz Workshop and stuff I wouldn't have been able to play the major rooms in the country

Q: Catch 22 isn't it

NW: Yeah

Q: But OK, how do you secretly feel about jazz [laughs]?!

NW: I love jazz, but I love Gospel too!! I love R&B, but I also do a radio show called *Jazz Profiles* — I've learned more about jazz doing the radio show than I ever knew [laughs]

Q: So when you came up how did you shape your style with all these influences

NW: I didn't. It's just natural. I sang at home, I sang in front of anybody who wanted to hear something, I went to church all the the time, but I left the church I was in to go to the Methodist Church where I could sing in the choir because I was a singer in the Pentecostal Church because I have always sung secular music, that has always been my gift because I have always believed God loved me and I didn't think I was a sinner at eight years old because I sang 'pop' tunes, so I sang with my Mom and her sisters, I sang some Gospel tunes a few times but I have always sung pop, always sung secular music...

Q: But there comes a point in a singer's life when you decide to give it a try and get a repertoire together and find a pianist

NW: I was in a band at fifteen, I worked with bug bands all around my home town, and within a hundred mile radius and when I came out of High School I went with Rusty Bryant, who had a major hit nationally ['All Nite Long'] I travelled the mid-West with him, I worked in Ohio — I mean I was always working, I was never without work at home, I never thought about it too much, when I went to New York and got a manager I was with Capitol Records in a matter of weeks and had to get a keyboard player — I did — that was, that was... and the next thing was a trio

Q: And what were you singing then

NW: I have always sung the American Songbook, I loved the great tunes, Broadway, everything, but that was what I heard, I heard R&B and Broadway, I wasn't in New York when I heard all the great material, I loved Cole Porter, George Gershwin, the American Songbook, what is a better way to go? I heard, as a girl, I heard Billy Eckstine, Jimmy Scott obviously [laughs] — I sound just like Jimmy [laughs] — And Dinah [Washington], I heard a lot of R&B, Little Esther, LaVerne Baker, Ruth Brown, and I was like kinda fifteen or so, it was a long time until I heard Sarah [Vaughan] and Ella [Fitzgerald] because my upbringing was pretty much male singers who were singing the blues or the big band stuff that my Dad listened to, so I sang more R&B, just the *good* songs, you know? All the stuff that would come out of Broadway I would hear, and by osmosis you grow, you do it, I never consciously sat down and said 'Well what do I do next?' I just did it.

Q: And you're with Capitol and so how did you get onto the supper club circuit because that's a big step

NW: The first time I worked in New York I played a club called The Blue Morocco in the Bronx, I worked in the daytime, sang on the weekends, and when my first record came I was with Capitol, Capitol put the record out, I went to Australia for a few months and when I came back that was it! I mean, they were waiting for me to get back

Q: So the door was finally open

NW: The door was open, like I was saying I was never not working, so I just went from Ohio, to a place to be heard in New York and straight to the supper clubs, Basin Street East, the Waldorf

Q: So this is a big deal now, in terms of your career at this point

NW: It was, yes, it was [laughs]

Q: So how did it feel, moving into the big time so smoothly — I mean, others have tried and failed and still others have struggled , to get there

NW: You don't stop to analyse it, you just do it! I always wanted to make sure the business did not run me, and that it didn't get away from me, it was important for me to be my parents daughter, my husband's wife — you understand what I'm sayin'? It was very important to me that I did not let it consume me, it was *not* enough to be happy! Happiness is not this business, and I always knew that, as a kid, you know? I was trying to have that balance, and I worked hard to get that balance.

Q: Any number of people have not, and been consumed by the business

NW: Exactly, exactly. I'm not impressed [laughs]

Q: That's courageous, because you must have had some hard decisions to make that could have taken you astray, so to speak, where people were saying, 'But you must do this...

NW: And I was saying, 'I do not want to do that, I do not want to work again 48 weeks a year, I do not ever want to know again where I'll be two years from now, this is not living, this is not what I want, I if I can't do it the way I want it I'll stay home! I was never interested in a fifty year career [laughs]

Q: But you got one

NW: I *know* [laughs]

Q: So how do you feel about that!

NW: I'm not thrilled! [laughs] In reality I'd rather be home, with my babies, with my kids, and with my grandchildren — but I understand, I'm a realist, but the bottom line is, in all honesty I'd rather be home!

Q: So why do you do it, is it the warmth you get from audiences, because they love you!

NW: Well, in all honesty, until a few years ago I supported five households, my father's, one house, my Mom, my mother was in Ohio — yeah, I have a lot of commitments that I didn't have to do, but if I'm going to work then I'm going to do that, yeah

Q: So you *are* driven woman [laughs]...

NW: [laughs] Well, the work is there and it's good to have it, if you walk away from it totally — I've always been of the firm opinion that if you are not out there people have a feeling that you're not valid anymore, anytime I have a recording out I like to be out there, where people can see me, I also realise that at some point I'd rather they didn't! [laughs] But I've come to grips with the fact that I'm still working, and I know there is a need, like club owners and people like that — 'You can't go, you gotta do it' — but that's a heavy burden, you know.

Q: So where do you draw the line, because your responsibilities won't go away it seems

NW: Well, this is the last serious, heavy year, the summer wasn't heavy at all, it's heavy this winter, this month and next month is, and January — November, December, January are like...

Q: Traditionally the heavy months

NW: But I'm not playing clubs! My last club was early this year, Seattle? No, Yoshi's, that was the last club. So now, basically it's concerts, whatever is on the schedule [laughs] Chicago at the

Auditorium Saturday, I'm at the Kimble Art Centre in Philadelphia on Friday, I'm in Kansas City tomorrow, they're all theatres and stuff.

Q: Wow, that's serious travel, how do you do it?

NW: I've no idea how I'm going to make this next eight weeks! I've done it before, but this is going to be a rough week, a rough two and half weeks! Yeah. I'm doing this thing with Ramsey [Lewis], we've got an album out [*Meant to Be*], and this is where these dates are coming from. I only have a couple of dates [of my own] this month, I work one club in the country I don't mind working in, it's a three hundred seat room, the sound is good, its four nights in two weekends, two four nighters, five shows as opposed to twelve shows in six nights, so that's the difference, I'll play that club — no more six nights, two shows, I can't do it, it stops being fun. You do it, and once you hit the floor of course you're fine, because this is what you do, but the bottom line you pay for it! It saps your energy, you do the best you can, and the shows are fabulous — it's not about that. The performance is the easy part.

Q: It's getting there

NW: It's getting there!

Q: I'm just wondering looking at the recordings that are doing well by young artists which are all 'in the tradition' whether the time might be right to show people how its done?

NW: I've just had two huge albums in this past year, one with Ramsey Lewis called *Meant to Be*, and my Christmas album — the first Christmas album I ever did — so. I don't know if people can understand, I'm not concerned with that, I do what I do, I do not live my life or give my thoughts to that, because it's all about what it is for me, it's not about what other people are doing, the important thing is I do my work, I do it well, and that external stuff — all it does is drag you down, I prefer to be a happy person! It's me, and I think that's the only way to be, people get concerned by all these things — it's not that important, do what you do and do it the best you can do it, I

look at some of the stuff that does sell, it's 'popular' — I don't want to be that, it doesn't mean anything to me, that doesn't concern me.

Q: It's a lesson we can all learn from. So all these years in the business, how do you shape your repertoire now?

NW: Do I like the song? [laughs] Do I want to sing it? It's all that matters

Q: So where do you get time to hear the new stuff?

NW: I don't do too many new things, I hear a lot of stuff but...I just recorded 'Blame It On My Youth,' with George Shearing the other day

Q: What album is that?

NW: My next album, I'm doing two albums at a time right now! I did two tunes with Toots Thielemans on the Saturday and I did one with George on Sunday and I flew back to — I guess it was Sunday and Monday and I flew back to L.A. on Tuesday, yeah. I'm doing another album with Ramsey with strings, five or six tracks with him, plus an album of my own which I haven't titled, it's just traditional music, just some good tunes that I've been wanting to sing, just looking for great 'Nancy Wilson Songs,' that fit my style — that's what you expect of me! And people know, I have a friend and he just went in his library and had taped stuff — 'I'd love to hear you do this, I'd love to hear you do that,' some of the songs are kinda obscure, but I have people always on the lookout, I'm not going to sit there and do it! Actually, when I slow down — tone down! — then I will! For these two albums I'm doing I listened to approximately 300 songs and there're many of the old classics that I've not got around to recording, then there are many that I've already recorded, then there's an Ann Murray tune I've always loved that's called 'He Needed Me' that I think is a 'Nancy Wilson Tune,' so it's songs that I've heard by others that I love, so I'm gettin' around to it

Q: So how do you see the future now you want to ease back a little

NW: Oh, I'm just finishing up, trying to get my kids together and once they're away from me, one's graduating another will have a lovely baby in February, so another year and I'm cool! Everybody will be good!

Q: No more responsibilities!

NW: Mmm Hmmm!

Q: Well that's a very honest interview, I'm honoured, really!

NW: I could make up stuff, but that's me! Somebody had asked me some stuff earlier today and I said, 'Hey! You know how many times I've listened to questions and whatnot, and it's like 'I don't know how to answer this, this time!' You know? There's no in depth stuff, I'm just a nice lady who sings! I've got a bit more time, if you have any more questions....

Q: I guess they they think with so many amazing albums and your life history they're looking for something that's not there

NW: Yes, but I mean, it's just getting up in the morning and saying 'Thank you God!' and moving on. And it's trying to enjoy every day, trying to enjoy life, trying to have a life, that's vital, it's not about the business, it really isn't. My family has allowed me to do this, they have allowed me to do it, because they don't want to take it away from me, even though it takes away from their time, their happiness

Q: There's one thing I noticed when I was doing the Ella biography was

NW: Did you see the TV special we did on Ella? I hosted a show which was on again last week, two hours on Ella, and I did two hours on the radio on her as well!

Q: So did you use my book?[laughs] Norman Granz gave me hand to do the American version,

NW: Oh, that's good

Q: He originally didn't want to participate but was in the UK when the UK version came out, and came on the phone, 'How dare you write a book about Ella without consulting me!' really strong

NW: [laughs] I know he does!

Q: But I said 'Did you know she was born in 1917 and not 1918 as she claimed?' He said, 'Do you know, I always thought there was something with her date of birth,' and he changed, just like that, we had a long talk, I told him the biography was coming out in the US in 9 months and if he wanted to contribute, there was time to get it all in, and he really took it seriously, speaking to me from a hotel in Paris where he took his wife on their wedding anniversary to give me material for the final two chapters

NW: [laughs]

Q: But the thing that came across, from Norman and all the musicians I spoke to who had accompanied her — guys like Paul Smith, Lou Levy, Tommy Flanagan whom you will know

NW: I do

Q: Was that she was driven by the business to the exclusion of family life, you weren't...

NW: That's exactly right! They used to ask me, 'Who do you want to be like?' I didn't want to be about anybody, I didn't see anybody really happy, I saw Dinah [Washington] married five times, I thought 'I don't see women happy,' I saw the business kick the women, so what was there about this that would make me want to do it?

Q: What was it?

NW: Nothing! [laughs] But if you have a gift you try to learn, you try to learn how to use the gift, here's what I am saying about knowing who you are, *knowing* I don't want that! But I will *do* this, but I can't *do* it that way. So I went and got the one manager that would understand that, and that was John Levy, and that was forty years ago and he's still my manager. I've thought about it

Q: So how did this come across in your dealings with him?

NW: He understood, he was a nice man and he also wasn't driven by money, never was, it's about people, it's about friendship, he and my Dad too, he's just a good person, and I wanted somebody who cared about me, not about the percentage

Q: You've been so together in your career, knowing what you want and how to achieve it, Ella was so *driven*, I get the feeling, and Billie was just consumed by the business which eat her up and spat her out

NW: They had 'people' around them, who guided their ships as opposed to them guiding it, yeah. I felt great sorrow when I saw things like that, but I figured you might be able, just maybe, do it *right!* Especially since I had great family, great background, wonderful parents who were very supportive, so I had a great background, I didn't come from this horrid place, I came from a good place, and I knew what happiness was, consequently if I ever lost a little bit, you just look inside and find it, because you know what it is, and don't get too far away from that, just remember your Grandmother's porch and the swing and picking the tomatoes in the garden — remember that — that was what was real, as well as important — I gotta go! Now I've got to find home [my hotel room]. Thanks for the cup of coffee, it was the first since I had breakfast!

WIND UP

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