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Summer - 2005 Magazine

Featured Artist - Nancy Zahn



Nancy Zahn is radiant. In fact, the singer emits an almost irresistible glow onstage as she delivers jazz standards with a resonance that fills the far corners of the room. Zahn's energy is palpable as she returns to singing professionally after a taking a break to raise her sons. Her poise and sophisticated phrasing define an artist in her element. The long interruption may have yielded an unanticipated musical bounty by creating such a powerful drive to sing that Zahn seems to pour 20 years of musical ideas and pent-up emotions into every song.

"People tell me all the time that I really seem to feel what I'm singing. I guess that's my reward for keeping it together," she said with rueful acceptance. "I have a lot more depth now—life just gives you depth, whether you want it or not."

For Zahn, music is all about emotion, "a whole-body experience" overflowing with wistfulness, pain, or celebration. Part of that experience comes from her deep connection to the lyrics of

any material she chooses, which she writes out longhand to get at their essential meaning. To hear Zahn, as her sensual voice slides over the syncopated rhythms and sometimes dissonant harmonies of jazz ballads, one might not guess at the eclectic roster of musicians she credits with inspiring her. Although she began taking formal voice lessons in her early teens, she also developed her technique by listening attentively to other singers. Still, it may come as a surprise for anyone who remembers treacly 1970s hits like "Close to You" and "We've Only Just Begun" to hear Zahn say she learned vibrato and phrasing from Karen Carpenter. Zahn also looked to Elton John for the entertainment value of his emotionally charged performances.

She went on to study voice at Fort Wright College in Spokane under Sister Marietta Coyle, where she was groomed for an operatic career. The music faculty even measured Zahn's body to gauge her potential for resonance, proclaiming her destined for success as an opera singer. They were crestfallen, said Zahn, when she elected to bypass opera and follow her passion for jazz.

Zahn also studied Bette Midler, playing with the Divine Miss M's outrageous and sexual persona until she found her own identity and crafted a confident stage presence.

A self-described health freak who takes handfuls of vitamins, Zahn embraces natural medicine and devours raw garlic (which she detests) if she feels a cold coming on. "If I get a cold before a performance," she said, "it's frickin' devastating." "I wanted to be a granola type—with make-up," she added, blithely defying stereotypes. Like any singer, Zahn must remain constantly aware of her instrument, and she cuddles and protects her voice. A detailed textbook she prepared for a vocal workshop she taught earlier this year warns students



against smoking, talking too quickly, raising their voice to be heard over loud machinery, cheering at athletic events, and crying with loud vocal sobs.

Despite preaching the importance of adequate rest to keep her voice supple, Zahn maintains a schedule that hardly leaves time for sitting still, let alone sleeping. She has run Riversong Catering since 1993, preparing lunches for river-rafting trips during the summer and other events in the off-season, and has been a substitute teacher in Brewster and Pateros for the past three years.

Today she also performs regularly at venues in the Methow Valley, Chelan, and Wenatchee, and participates as a singer in musical theater.

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Zahn has always found the energy to push herself, particularly if it means being able to sing. After college she belted out 30 to 40 songs a night, five or six days a week, touring full-time with a top-40 cover band called Moondance. Touring was fun but a bit lonely, she said, and she finally abandoned it in Alaska when she was seven months pregnant. Despite the rigors of life on the road, the music always propelled her. "I don't care what I'm doing—it's my driving force, for sure." Her career was also tested by a number of personal and musical tragedies, with the death of four band members over the years. These losses and her commitment to raising her two sons, now 18 and 21, caused her to make the difficult decision to put aside her singing career until her sons graduated from high school. "I've always eaten responsibility for breakfast," she said. "I love taking on a challenge and striving to excel."



While the performing was satisfying, the top-40 repertoire was not an adequate forum for artistic expression. Ever since hearing Ella Fitzgerald, Zahn said she knew jazz was her musical home, but the economic realities made for inevitable trade-offs. Today she is trying to tip the equation. "I've been taking different paths my whole life and it never quite works out—so now I'm going to take this one," she said. Her dream is to perform at a jazz festival, where she would be included in a gathering of great jazz musicians.

Zahn currently sings with two jazz bands, with overlapping but varying personnel. Locally, she performs most often with Moment's Notice (usually consisting of Terry Hunt on guitar, Glenn Isaacson on keyboard, Wayne Mendro on horns, Bob Hougham on trumpet, Roger Vandivort on bass, and Keith Kessler on drums).

Zahn is willing to challenge herself and the band—as well as her audience—by taking musical risks. Listening to a recent demo tape, she studied her inflections as her voice caressed classics like "Round Midnight" and "Girl from Ipanema." The freedom to experiment keeps her material fresh and true to the improvisational roots of jazz, and allows the music to be constantly renewed as an expressive outlet.

Knowing how central music has been to her as a means of communication, Zahn is zealous about extending the opportunity to others. As a substitute teacher, she often sings for her classes, particularly in Brewster, where there is no elementary music program. "It's an absolute crime that they're not getting any musical education," she said. "When I sing, it really helps the kids focus."

Zahn can trace her own path from a girl with stagefright to the relaxed and gracious performer she is today. "There are three things," she said, "that I love about the stage—the words to the song I'm singing, the musicians that are up there with me, and the eyes of the public in the audience—knowing they understand."

Nancy Zahn can be heard with Moment's Notice on Wednesdays at the Twisp River Pub through the summer, and on July 1 and 29 at Tsilian Cellars in Chelan. She also sings every other Sunday at Chateau Faire Le Pont Winery in Wenatchee, as well as at other venues throughout North Central Washington.

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