

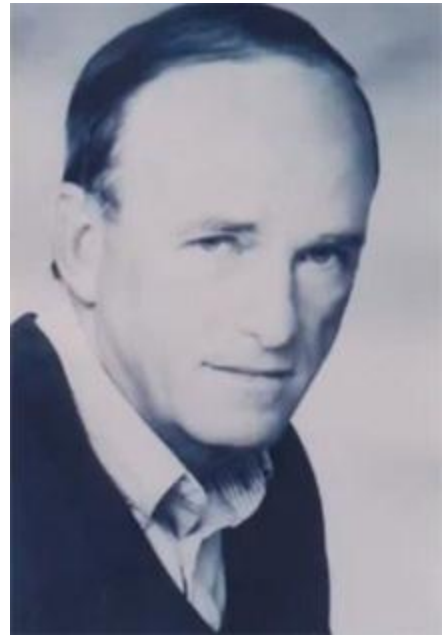
"You just knew she had heartbreak in her veins" - Jason Darrow recalls his musical partnership with Jane Olivor

By Wendy Fraser
Copyright Wendy Fraser 2012

Songwriter Jason Darrow's quest for a singer who could become "a contemporary Piaf" took him on a long and fruitless search through the nightclubs and cabarets of New York City in the 1970s.

Darrow had recently returned from spending four months in France where he developed a successful songwriting partnership with the famed singer and composer Gilbert Becaud. He remembers that he was particularly pleased with the final song from their 14-song collaboration – his adaptation of a jaunty, light-hearted Becaud number titled "L'important C'est La Rose."

He says Becaud was looking for a lyricist and partner who could be an "adaptor, not a translator."



Together, they transformed "L'important C'est La Rose" into a dramatic, soaring anthem about the search for love. Its reassuring and uplifting lyrics promised there is "one who's meant to love us in this world." This new version of the song required a powerful, passionate singer who could convey the song's message of the triumph of hope over experience.

Then...one night...and here we'll cue the music from A Star is Born... Darrow and a friend were sitting in the bar of Reno Sweeney, a tony boite on West 13th Street in Greenwich Village. An Art Deco fantasyland, Reno Sweeney attracted people in black tie and evening gowns from uptown and kids in jeans from downtown; gays and straights; Jackie Onassis and Mick Jagger.

A female singer was performing in the cabaret section of the club. Because that section was cordoned off behind a curtain, the singer was hidden from view.

Jason Darrow's first impression was that she had an "incredible voice but she was singing a common song, not at all apropos to her voice. But her voice was so haunting and compelling that I stopped talking to my friend." A captivated Darrow urged his companion to pay attention to the singer. The friend paused, listened, and then commented that the song was nothing special.

"Forget the song, listen to that voice," an excited Darrow told his friend. "I loved her without ever seeing her," he says of his discovery of Jane Olivor.

That performance at Reno Sweeney led to an on-and-off musical partnership and a friendship that would produce some of Jane's greatest music and span four decades.

When he saw her face-to-face that first night, he encountered an androgynous boy/girl - the gamine he had been seeking. His voice is warm with affection as he vividly recalls the moment he met the slight, fine-boned young woman with mesmerizing "big, beautiful green-blue eyes" and a look that evoked memories of the young Audrey Hepburn.

"It was like she dropped from heaven," Darrow says of his introduction to Jane Olivor. "You just knew she had heartbreak in her veins."

At that time, Jane was deeply devoted to folk music and aspired to be a contemporary Joan Baez. Darrow, meanwhile, was convinced he'd found his contemporary Piaf, despite her eclectic-to-say-the-least set list that evening: a now-forgotten song about Harpo Marx (!), the Hebrew folk song "Hava Nagila" and "Danny Boy."

Although Olivor had listened as a child to Edith Piaf, she would not to be dissuaded from pursuing her dream of becoming a successful folk singer. She and Darrow soon parted company. A few months later, with her career stalled, she contacted Darrow and said she was willing to try doing things his way.

"She said, 'OK, where's the song?' and I just handed it to her and she nailed it the first time," he says of "L'important C'est La Rose."

Darrow believes it's important to place "L'important C'est La Rose" in the context of its times. A self-described romantic, he depicts the 1970s as a cold and cynical decade - a "dark and decadent time" when the sexual revolution was at its height, revellers whirled from disco to disco and there was little room for sentiment or - heaven forbid - true love.

However, he shrewdly observes that beneath all those glittering, shiny surfaces, people are people and still yearn to love and be loved. That is the essence of the song destined to melt the hardest of hearts at Reno Sweeney.

But Jane Olivor was not convinced. "She was terrified of doing it because it was so different from anything she'd sung before. 'My biggest fear is that they'll hate it and throw tomatoes at me,'" she told Darrow.

Her fears were unfounded. The Reno Sweeney crowd "went absolutely bananas" over her interpretation of "L'important C'est La Rose" and rewarded her performance with a resounding standing ovation. "Her shows were sold out weeks in advance and that started her down the road," Darrow says.

They began polishing her act. A designer friend consigned Jane's peasant dresses to the closet and replaced them with the blouses with bell-shaped sleeves and Peter Pan collars that became a staple of her onstage attire.

But a reluctant Jane did not fully embrace all the changes Darrow was making in her songs, performances and style.

"You can't blame Janie – she was making a full transition and that's a difficult thing to do," he explains.

Watching his protégé on stage, Darrow noted that she preferred to anchor herself there and sing with her eyes tightly closed. He says he wrote "Carousel of Love" as a deliberate attempt to move her away from that rigid posture, draw her out from behind the microphone and put her among the audience for a fun exchange with her fans.



"We had another one of our famous fights over "Carousel of Love," Darrow recalls with a laugh. "She was ready to kill me. She told me, "You better be right."

"L'important C'est La Rose" and Jane's own arrangement of "Some Enchanted Evening" and "the yearning, haunting, longing" way she sang those songs soon led to a Columbia Records contract, a sold-out Carnegie Hall debut, years of touring, numerous TV appearances, and a Top 20 single and duet at the Academy Awards with her idol Johnny Mathis.

Jason Darrow still marvels at what he calls Jane Olivor's "brilliant artistry."

He says she is unique among all the singers he's worked with in her innate ability to understand a song's emotional shadings, uncover its musical subtleties and sing it the way it was always meant to be sung.

"I never had to tell her how to sing "L'important C'est La Rose." I never said one word about it. Most artists might need line feeds, but never, never with Jane."

He has fond memories of those days in 1976 when they were recording her debut album, *First Night*, which was subsequently proclaimed Album of the Year by *Stereo Review*.

First Night featured several songs that long remained part of Jane Olivor's repertoire, including "L'important C'est La Rose," "Some Enchanted Evening," "Carousel of Love," "Vincent" and "One More Ride on Merry-Go-Round."

He says they captured Olivor's now-classic rendition of "Some Enchanted Evening" in a single jaw-dropping take.

"There were 32 musicians in the studio and she did it in one take. The musicians were all amazed. She was amazing."

During the course of their partnership, Jason Darrow produced *Stay the Night*, parts of *The Best Side of Goodbye*, *In Concert* and three songs on *Songs of the Season*. He co-wrote "Let's

Make Some Memories” with Jane and also served as her manager.

In addition to “L'important C'est La Rose” and “Carousel of Love”, his songs “Turn Away”, “Honesty”, “Song for My Father” (his own personal favourite Olivor song), “Daydreams”, “I Believe in You” and “Spirit of Christmas” were written for or recorded by Jane.

He believes Jane is at her best on CD when she's singing live in the studio, minus the overdubs and the sometimes heavy and intrusive technology so prevalent on today's recordings.

"We rehearsed outside the studio," he says of First Night. "Inside the studio, we had her singing along with the orchestra. She was singing to somebody, she knew people were listening and that made her better."

He employed a similar technique with the songs he produced for the 2001 Songs of the Season holiday CD.

"Fans should listen closely to the three songs I produced for that CD (“Spirit of Christmas”, “You Don't Know How Beautiful You Are” and “Elusive Butterfly”). See if they can tell that those songs were done live in the studio."

He portrays their musical partnership as an enduring collaboration between two strong-willed people immersed in the creative process.

"We were different personalities with different philosophies, and that coming together, that abrasion, created the spark," he says.

For example, Jane was initially reluctant to record the Chiffons' “He's So Fine” with its doo-lang, doo-lang chorus. She told him the lyrics didn't say anything.

But Darrow was looking for a lighter song for the Stay the Night album. To convince her that his slowed-down version of “He's So Fine” would work, he put the 45 of that song on the record player, but played it at 33 RPM speed.

"You're up to something!" Jane said of the song that would become her best-selling single.

The Stay the Night CD also became the best-selling CD of her career.

"I picked all the songs for Stay the Night, as well as writing three songs," Darrow remembers. "The previous album, Chasing Rainbows, was a financial and artistic failure, so when Jane and Columbia approached me to do the next album, I was given artistic freedom. It was sung live with the orchestra.

"The title song came into my office, unsolicited. It was by an unknown writer from Florida



who I believe never wrote another song. The melody was perfect for Jane's beautiful alto voice and the lyric was a desperate cry for love."

Darrow maintains that Jane Olivor's career took a wrong turn with Stay the Night's follow-up, The Best Side of Goodbye.

Columbia Records decided to employ multiple producers on that CD, the production dragged on month after month and costs soared.

Darrow was eventually called in to help salvage the project.

Citing the old adage that a camel is a horse designed by a committee, he calls The Best Side of Goodbye's multiple-producer approach "disastrous."

And also ruinously expensive.

Darrow notes that the budget for First Night was \$71,000, while production costs on The Best Side of Goodbye eventually ballooned to more than a quarter of a million dollars.

Those costs were reflected in over-blown production values with numerous overdubs, which Darrow likens to "putting handcuffs on her."

Referring to the music industry term "in the pocket," he explains, "Janie does not sing or stay squarely in the pocket. She's such an artist that when she's singing, she'll steal time, go ahead, come back, be in-between. She can't stay boxed in. You have to let her take the lead. She has to be free and you have to let the music flow freely with her."

Columbia treated Jane badly, Darrow says. "The money for that project was held against Jane's royalties. Columbia created that situation, they shoved Jane into it and then they held it against her...I think, again, they had their idea of what Jane should be and Jane had a different idea. She was not a pop artist in that way."

He says that experience was one of several "dirty blows" she absorbed in the tough and sometimes treacherous music industry.

Her final Columbia CD was In Concert, recorded at Boston's Berklee School of Music in December 1981 and released in 1982. Because of The Best Side of Goodbye experience, the pressure was on from the record company and this time the budget was tightly restricted.

What you hear on In Concert is what you get, according to Darrow.

"We only had the time and money to record the songs we had. Thank God she was in tune and she sang as well as she did."

Those constraints meant that Jane had one short week to master the lushly romantic ballad "Daydreams", co-written by Darrow and Georges Delerue.

"The first time she ever sang it live anywhere was for In Concert. Again, it's incredible that she can do that, with all that tension and pressure and so much riding on it." Regrettably, Darrow says there is no treasure trove of unreleased Jane Olivor material hidden away in a Columbia/Sony vault.

"There's one song in the vaults that I know of," he says. "It was also sung by Melissa Manchester and it's called "Don't Want The Heartache". When Sony was planning to release The Best of Jane Olivor in 2004, they contacted me to see if I had any old material they could use on the CD. I had to tell them no. I know for a fact that there's not a backlog of unreleased songs."

Discussing the prospect of future Jane Olivor CDs, he believes that it's more difficult to land a recording contract today than it was in the 1970s.

"It's the economics of the business," he explains. "When Stay the Night came out, it sold a quarter of a million records and that made it what they called a `minor seller.' Today, a number one record wouldn't sell that many copies. That's a big difference, now that the world has decided music is free. There are not a lot of records being sold. People don't make money on record sales – they make money through their live performances or through the movies, by having a song tied in with a movie."

Looking back over the many years of their association, Jason Darrow says Jane Olivor the performer has evolved into someone he calls "the consummate artist." "I've had more success with other artists and have had other records that have sold more. Melissa (Manchester) is a very good singer, but I can and will say for publication that Janie is 100 times the singer and artist that those other singers are."



As for her personal journey and the changes she's undergone, he comments that she is certainly more articulate than the young gamine who at times expressed herself in an awkward form of Brooklynese.

"She's much more articulate now and can definitely get her point across," he notes.

And if she has lost some of the innocence and youthful joie-de-vivre that first enchanted him in the mid-1970s, that can be attributed to experience, to the pressures of stardom and to those "dirty blows" along the way. He continues, "I don't think Janie would have been as successful starting out in the `80s or 90s as she was in the `70s. The timing was right for her."

Jason Darrow hopes that the timing could be right again today. A theme running through his comments is the optimism, hope and healing message in Jane Olivor's songs and performances.

"We need her more than ever now – more than we needed her then," he concludes. "She's transformed a lot of lives."

Jason Darrow began his songwriting career as a staff writer for Famous Music. Working as a lyricist, he collaborated with Gilbert Becaud, Stephen Schwartz, Georges Delerue, Carter Cathcart, Jeremy Stone, Gerard Cohen and Jane Olivior. He produced Jane Olivior, Melissa Manchester, Neale Lundgren and Marcus Simeone.

Jason Darrow died in Florida in December 2009, just six months after this interview. In the year prior to his death, he finished writing a novel about his life in the music business titled #1 With a Bullet, and was seeking an agent for the book. His interview with Wendy Fraser was only the third time he spoke 'on the record' about his friendship and collaboration with Jane Olivior.

