

Jane Olivor: *Safe Return*
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HOTHOUSE FLOWER JANE OLIVOR STILL SUPERB

Jane Olivor, the fondly recalled chanteuse whose mid-'70s songs of romantic longing made her something of a hothouse flower, much too special to be embraced by Top 40 radio or mainstream audiences, has released ***Safe Return***, a live concert DVD and CD. Filmed in November 2003 at Boston's Berklee Performance Center, also the site of her 1982 "In Concert" album, this new program confirms Olivor as the preeminent interpreter of the ballad. Her singing is still distinguished by the unalloyed gold of her mellifluous voice and the sensitive, knowing way that she phrases a lyric.



Olivor was 56 at the time the concert was filmed, but you'd never know it. She's as beautiful as she ever was, with a bright smile and eyes that sparkle as an outward sign of the irrepressible joy that she conveys on stage. And her voice has held up well over the years. She may now be singing in the alto range instead of the mezzo soprano that first caught listeners' attention back in the '70s, but the voice has grown richer, warmer.

And, as Olivor herself explains in the interview segment that stands as the DVD's sole special feature, she's bringing more with her to the stage these days. Like all performers, Olivor's life experiences can't help but inform her performing. After hearing her explain the "wild ride" that she embarked upon when she became a seeming overnight sensation, the temporary detour that kept her away from a concert stage for nearly a decade, and her decision to come back so that she could fulfill a promise to herself, you'll have a greater appreciation of the journey that Jane Olivor has made. That her considerable talents have remained intact through it all is a testament to the wisdom that she had to walk away from her career at a time when staying in it might have extinguished the spark completely.

Stage fright and conflicts with her record label, Columbia, were beginning to sap the love of the music for her. Her time off was also spent caring for her new husband, who died only a few years after their marriage.

Olivor returned to performing, albeit sporadically, in the early '90s. This program represents the culmination of the past decade for her: uncovering new material, and finding new meaning in the staples of her early repertoire. Backed by a trio of musicians including Eric Conway on piano, Ken Bichel on synthesizer, and David Finck on upright and electric bass, Olivor seizes the audience's rapt attention from the moment she walks onstage with her opening number, "You," as fitting a song as any to express her gratitude to her faithful fans. Her tones are clear and her delivery is as emphatic as when she first recorded the song on her benchmark *Chasing Rainbows* album many years ago.

"Warm," from the Love Decides CD that marked her return to recording nearly 3 ½ years ago, showcases the purity and delicacy of her still youthful voice.

She revises the lyrics of her own composition, "Let's Make Some Memories," so that the song's quest to "touch the stars" is more readily within reach than in the original version, if only because the singer now realizes that she "can see them in your eyes."

"Annie's Song" finds Olivor completely immersed in the melody, with her vocals gently pushing and pulling at John Denver's words, and her coda are exquisite.

There is real passion in her delivery of "The Last Time I Felt Like This," the song that she and Johnny Mathis sang on the soundtrack of the film *Same Time, Next Year*, and which was subsequently nominated for an Academy Award for Best Song.

Her wise rendition of Stephen Schwartz's "Hardest Part of Love" knowingly conveys the life lesson in raising and loving children so that you can eventually let them fly off on their own. "You cannot close the acorn," the song asserts, "once the oak begins to grow."

If possible, Olivor imbues Jason Darrow's "Daydreams" with more dreamy fervor than when she first recorded it for 1982's *In Concert* album. "Don't wake me and say that I'm dreaming," the singer implores. It is hard to believe that 22 years separate the original version of the song with this version, with Olivor still convincing in her impassioned plea for romantic love.

The bouncy "Carousel of Love" finds the singer down in the audience, reaching out and taking hold of people's hands, in much the same way that she takes hold of their hearts with her earnest singing.

Stephen Schwartz's "Crowded Island" gets an appropriately tongue-in-cheek reading from Olivor, with its winking view of people's quest for relationships. "Everyone I know wants to be in love with someone, just not with someone they know," the singer explains, and we laugh along with her as we identify with the foibles of trying to meet that special someone in today's world.

Olivor mines Neil Diamond's "Brooklyn Roads" for its autobiographical look at her early days growing up in that famous borough of New York City. She may not have written the song, but she is utterly convincing in relating how her dreams of "castles...dragons and kings" soothed and inspired her in a place that she dares not revisit, for fear that she'd see "all the scars that love erases." A real highlight.

"Run for the Roses," Dan Fogelberg's song about horses and horseracing, finds the singer drawing on her lifelong love of same in a thoroughbred performance that builds to a full throated, tour-de-force conclusion.

Jane then effortlessly slips into the jazzy "Sun in the Morning" from *Annie Get Your Gun*, backed only by Finck on upright bass. As she did with "Let It Snow" from 2001's *Songs of the Season* CD, Olivor here employs a playful, almost kittenish delivery that makes one wish that she would explore this style more in the future.

"Some Enchanted Evening" bears out the explanation that Jane gives to her rendition of the song in the interview segment on the DVD. Putting aside Ezio Pinza's rigid singing of the number from *South Pacific*, Olivor instead offers the song up as a kind of prayer. (In

fact, she admits to having "Ave Maria" in mind when she arranged her version.) "Once you have found him, never let him go," the vocalist sings, and that high, thin, beseeching final note that first mesmerized us over 25 years ago still grabs us in these early years of the new millennium. Stunning.

Olivor steps in tune to the cadences of Neil Sedaka's "The Big Parade," building to a crescendo as she reminds us that an entire world will pass us by if we don't get out there and "sing along." A credo worth following, to be sure.

Olivor's voice is still able to convey the wistful longing of "Pretty Girl," which she wrote at a time when she felt unattractive and unloved. But while she muses that "life would be so free and easy" if she were prettier, she also has enough insight to realize that, if she "had magic hands," she would change the eyes of the myopic moron who can't see her for who she really is.

Songwriter Neal Lundgren set 14th century Persian poet Hafiz's words to music in "You Don't Know How Beautiful You Are," and Olivor gives a stirring reading, her voice ringing out with zeal when she sings of "saints bowing in the mountains" and "wondrous sounds that break into light." Bichel's synthesizer sets the mood with its syncopated, whirling dervish accompaniment, and Conway's backing vocals effectively augment Olivor's own singing.

Stephen Schwartz is represented again with the jaunty country-tinged "Sippin' Wine"—a wine that tasted sweeter, Olivor confesses, when she and her lover had "nothing but each other, and a pocketful of dreams." Olivor's infectious delivery turns what might otherwise be a sappy, schmaltzy song into a recognition that it is love, not material things, that makes life full and rewarding—just as it is often the quest, the journey, rather than the attainment of what we pursue, that yields the most pleasure.

The singer next takes an artistic leap by marrying "How Are Things in Glocca Morra" (from Finian's Rainbow) with a dirge of sorts from the film *Rob Roy*, a song called "Aileen Duinn" that Olivor sings in old Celtic and Old Scottish. Though the words are obviously unintelligible to the average listener, the number soars to majestic heights in Olivor's hands—especially when she goes into her "head voice" during the song. Thrilling.

"Stay the Night" continues to move audiences with its insistent plea for a lover to stick around until the morning. Its "radio ready" lyrics may seem simplistic on the surface, yet Olivor never fails to uncover the transcendent beauty of the loneliness at its core. Her performance elicits a standing ovation from the crowd.

"The Right Garden" is probably the weakest number in the program. Olivor's voice sounds tired and strained throughout much of it, and her delivery is not entirely convincing. Like "Stay the Night" before it, this song has rather simplistic lyrics, but because Olivor does not reveal any deeper subtext as she does with "Stay the Night," the song is not raised above cliché.

"One More Ride on the Merry-go-Round" ably demonstrates Olivor's ability to initially hold back on her delivery, letting the number build in intensity to a frenzied, no-holds-barred finale. Unlike the recorded version on Jane's *First Night* debut album, which launches into its oom-pah-pah calliope accompaniment right from the start, Olivor's rendition here begins tentatively.

Throughout the first verse and chorus, she employs a kind of sotto voce style that is dramatically effective. The tempo then quickens as she begins the second verse. By the third go round, Olivor lets herself get carried away in the wild abandon of the song's carnival atmosphere. I am sure that this is one of the songs to which a writer was referring many years ago when he wrote that Olivor had a certain "lust for center stage."

After her bows, Olivor returns and gives a beautifully expressive reading of Jason Darrow and Gilbert Becaud's "L'Important C'est La Rose," plucking a rose from the vase atop Conway's piano and giving it to an audience member as a symbol of her love for her fans. (Look for a continuity problem here as Olivor's hair morphs from being parted in the middle throughout the song, to reverting back to the bangs she wears for the rest of the program once she sings the final note of the song. As she bows and blows a kiss to the crowd while still standing amidst the audience, notice that her bangs are brushed down over her forehead once again. This discrepancy is due to the fact that Olivor had to film the song a second time that night for technical reasons.)

The singer recasts the contemporary Christian bent of Amy Grant's "Love of Another Kind" so that it is about love between two people, as opposed to the love between a person and her Savior, as Grant originally wrote it. Its positive message about love is no less effusive, even in Olivor's secularized version: "Some say love brings hurt, I say love brings healing, Understanding first, it's a love of another kind."

Olivor next introduces the song for which the DVD is named, "Safe Return." Debuting the number here in Boston, the singer explains its theme of longing for the return of a loved one.

Daniel, my own, my warrior fine and fair
Are you coming home to the life we share
Or are you broken now in a battle somewhere
I steel my heart with a lover's prayer...

Olivor downplays the "return from war" theme in her introduction, nestling it between references to returning from the office and from a trip. But with lyrics like the ones above, it is impossible not to think of the song in those terms—particularly with our nation's protracted presence in Iraq. Her voice is haunting throughout, as she intones repeatedly, "I don't want a hero, or a lesson to learn, All I want is your safe return." The song should rightfully become another Olivor classic.

From there, Jane segues into a no-frills reading of the 1950's classic "I Believe" that is quiet, focused, and absolutely riveting in its starkness. A perfect example of how less can be more.

Olivor's composition "Where There Is Love," about going back to a place where love holds us closely and makes us feel at home, is a fitting farewell to Boston, a city that has welcomed her with open arms throughout the years.

The singer then does a quick reprise of "Let's Make Some (New) Memories" before taking her final bow and walking off the stage. She is here one moment, touching us; inviting, cajoling, imploring us to sharing her outlook on life and love. Then, in the blink of an eye, she is suddenly gone, leaving us filled with warmth and joy—and the kind of inexpressible longing that...well, that she would be able to convey so well in song.

Forget the histrionics of a Celine Dion, the bare mid-riff posturing of a Britney Spears, or the acrobatic boys twirling around Cher. Olivor's heartfelt, emotional delivery is the real deal.