

Talkin' Broadway

Interview with Jane Olivor

by Jonathan Frank

Copyright Talkin' Broadway 2004

The tale of Jane Olivor's meteoric rise to stardom would have been right at home in a Judy Garland film. She was granted every singer's genie wish: to be discovered in a small cabaret room, given a recording contract with a major label and performing in sold out concert halls all over the country. Her first album, *First Night*, was named Album of the Year by Stereo Review. A duet with Johnny Mathis was nominated for an Oscar. Her early reviews compared her to Barbara Streisand and Edith Piaf. In 1983, at the height of her success, Olivor took a hiatus from performing that turned into a ten year break. This year, a decade after her triumphant return to the stage, Olivor has released a new album, *Safe Return*, a live recording that has been released on DVD as well.



Jonathan: You basically lived out the cabaret performer's ultimate dream. You were discovered in Reno Sweeney and got catapulted to instant fame and success.

Jane: Yes. The Reno Sweeney club was really special; it had such a patina about it. Performers would come there and hang around and drink ... it was like what I imagine the Algonquin was like back in the '40s.

I walked by where it used to be when I was recording my Christmas CD a few years ago. There's still a bar there, so I went down the two stairs to the entrance and went in. The front bar area is still the same, but the back space is completely different. I got choked up remembering my appearances there. I remembered my audition for Lewis Friedman. I had gone in and knocked on the dressing room door, opened it and went in but didn't see anybody inside at first ... Lewis was so short! I finally looked down and saw him and he said, "Hi, what's your name?" I said, "Jane Olivor," and he said, "What are you going to sing for your three song audition?" I said, "Lalena," and he sniffed and said, "Never heard of it." I told him it was from Donovan then mentioned my second song and told him that my third song would be "Some Enchanted Evening," to which he replied, "Not in this room, you don't!"

JF: Were you going to sing the arrangement that you wrote and would later record on your first CD, *First Night*?

JO: Yes. I told him I didn't sing it like Ezio Pinza, so he said, "Well, do what you want!" He was a major character. He cared about every aspect of that club and it showed!

I remember being at Reno Sweeney one night when Peter Allen was performing ... I had never seen anything like him. He was mesmerizing! He used to play the piano and sing, all the while looking at the audience as if he wanted to bite them. That's what was so fascinating about him.

JF: There's a scene in *Boy From Oz* in which Peter Allen sings "Bi-Coastal" at Reno Sweeney and becomes a major star because of that. And that is essentially what happened to you as well: you were performing there, got discovered, and received a recording contract with Columbia Records.

JO: Yes. It happened during the first show I had ever done, in fact. Clive Davis was in the audience ... he was right under my nose as a matter of fact. I'll tell you something, though. Because I was so green and so new, I knew that I was not ready. First of all, I really didn't know my voice then. I got shot out of a cannon. Everything started at the same time and I wasn't really able to handle it. When I went to Columbia Records and signed with William Morris, I felt intimidated. So it really was the opposite of what everybody thought I was, and should be, feeling. Then I developed tremendous stage fright. I thought that any day it would leave and I would get over it, but it never did; every day it got worse.

I never did drugs or alcohol to get myself through a show; I always faced my fear head on and 'alone.' If I had had a half a glass of wine before a show, I would have been asleep. I would have been in a coma if I had taken a Valium! I stopped singing because I just couldn't take it any more. In addition to the stage fright, I felt like I could never catch up, and that feeling is very debilitating.

I thought I would just take six months off. But six months felt so good that it turned into ten years. The more time that accumulated, the more I realized I could not go back. I really saved myself for a possible future doing that, though. I had to save my sanity and my soul, and I got a lot of flack for it, because nobody ever gave it up ... nobody walked away from that. I feel that you need to have a lot of courage, though, to walk away from something that you really love.

JF: What made you decide you needed to start performing again?

JO: I always believed that I would finish what I started and that performing is what I was meant to do. Also, I started taking Prozac. When I stopped performing there were no drugs to combat anxiety, but now there is a plethora of them!

JF: Are you a lot more comfortable performing on stage now as a result?

JO: Yes I am. That I attribute not only to the medication but to living life and having the strength to leave and come back on my own terms.

JF: You really left at the peak of your success. In 1979 a duet you did with Johnny Mathis, "The Last Time I Felt Like This" from *Same Time Next Year*, was nominated for an Oscar. And you performed it at the Academy Awards Ceremony.

JO: Yes. I'm so flaky and quirky, though ... my dress didn't fit that night so I ended up wearing someone else's dress at the last minute! (laughs)

JF: What amazes me is that you were able to perform at all. I can't imagine how someone with such an intense level of stage fright would be able to sing for what is the biggest audience in the world ...

JO: I kept looking at Johnny! (laughs) I don't know how I did it. I was the only one with blue lips ... my hands were freezing from the stress! Everybody is partying and having a great time and I'm standing around in someone else's dress with blue lips and frozen hands ... it was fabulous!

JF: In addition to Johnny Mathis, you also toured with one of my favorite performers, Charles Aznavour.

JO: He's a lovely man. We toured the US and one of our best stops was in Detroit, where we filmed a PBS special. It was a wonderful tour. And I got to go to Paris with Johnny Mathis. We performed at the Olympia, which is where Edith Piaf performed.

JF: Were you his opening act?

JO: Yes. We performed together on three different occasions: three times in the United States and once in Paris. He was my idol ... it wasn't Streisand or any of the singers coming from Broadway. I loved folk and listened to those singers: Carolyn Hester, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel ... I know I'm dating myself with this (laughs).

JF: You do a lot of songs from Broadway, though. Did you ever want to be an actress?

JO: I would like to act ... but I think it would have to be a very specific role or character. I would love to try.

JF: You do a lot of your own arrangements. Do you have any formal musical training?

JO: No. But I just love getting into a song, changing the chords, and making it mine. That's what really excites me and gives me impetuous to sing a song ... I have to change it in some way and make it mine ... if you're going to sing it the same way as everybody else, why do it?



JF: You have quite a number of songs by Stephen on your latest album, Safe Return, including one I hadn't heard before, "Sippin' Wine."

JO: I love Stephen Schwartz's songs. I think I sing more of his songs than of any other writer ... I do at least four or five of his songs a night. When I was doing my second or third album, Stephen came to me and said he had a song called "Manchild Lullaby," which he played for me. I had never heard such interesting changes within the pop genre! I recorded it on my album The Best Side of Goodbye. I remember seeing Godspell before anybody knew who he was and just loving what he did musically. The songs were in the folk vein and I just fell in love with his work.

JF: I read that Stephen Schwartz wrote a song for your holiday CD, Songs of the Season.

JO: Yes. He wrote "The Chanukah Song (We Are Lights)" which is gorgeous.

JF: What draws you to a song, the music or the lyrics?

JO: The first thing I listen to and notice is the music: I listen to the chord changes and the melody. Then I will focus on the lyrics to see if they make sense and if they contain something that I want to say and believe in. So many writers don't seem to realize that lyrics are not the same as conversation, though. The language should be heightened and every word should be carefully chosen versus simply writing down whatever happens to fit the song.

JF: What songwriters are you gravitating towards nowadays?

JO: Well, in addition to Stephen Schwartz, I love John Bucchino, Craig Carnelia ... and I hear Cole Porter and Irving Berlin are pretty good (laughs).

JF: You will be performing at Town Hall in New York on May 1st. Is the show going to be similar to the one you recorded the CD and DVD you just released, Safe Return?

JO: A lot of the songs will from the new album, but there will be some other material as well.

JF: Since the DVD is officially released on April 27th, I guess the show will be your release party.

JO: Yes, I guess it will!

JF: What are your plans after Town Hall?

JO: I don't have anything planned until September. I'll be in Tucson, Arizona and then Pennsylvania. People can go to my website, www.janeolivor.com for dates and more information.