

The Great White Hype?

Some say she's a beautiful songbird possessed of remarkable chops. Others say she's the hollow, talentless product of slick hustlers and skilled cosmeticians. Between the extreme pronouncements of the jazz cognoscenti, Jane Monheit continues to rise, and nothing anyone says or does is likely to impede her progress.

by Alexander Gelfand
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"SHE'S SO FREAKIN' SEXY! She's so sexy, it's crazy!"

The words leapt from the lips of the female hairstylist hired to tease and primp the flowing locks of 24-year-old chanteuse and media phenomenon Jane Monheit. The singer had come to photographer Tom LeGoff's studio on Manhattan's Lower East Side for her *JAZZIZ* photo shoot, fresh from an interview on NECN, an East Coast cable news network. Although she had spent the previous hour trapped in an overheated cab stuck in Manhattan traffic, she shimmied into her leopard-skin outfit and further prepared for the shoot without a hint of complaint.

Already a veteran of the media circuit, Monheit knows the drill. Despite having recently returned from a series of appearances in Europe (she's big in Germany – a female Hasselhoff, minus the tan and the gut), she showed no sign of jet lag, and seemed completely at home in the studio.

LeGoff, who has worked with a raft of professional faces, was suitably impressed. Speaking to Monheit's manager, Mary Ann Topper, during one of the singer's numerous costume changes, the photographer revealed that many female vocalists are uncomfortable when asked to "do" sexy or sultry. Monheit, on the other hand, knows exactly what to do – and has no qualms about doing it.

There has been much fuss about the singer, but, in truth, it's hard to understand what it is all about. In person, Monheit is far less nubile than her CD cover art would suggest. Many of her publicity shots evoke scenes from the original "Star Trek" television series when Captain Kirk first meets his alien *bimbo du jour*: Monheit is incandescent, alluring, otherworldly. But without the cheesecloth and soft lighting, she seems more Rubenesque than sylphid. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is somewhat disappointing, especially considering the attention her looks have garnered in the press.

Nonetheless, Monheit *acts* like a sexbomb, and that makes all the difference. She has the confident bearing of a woman who is used to a certain amount of attention, and she is almost ludicrously photogenic. She's also very much at home in front of the camera, posing like a pro, making goo-goo eyes one minute, feigning nonchalance the next.

And all the while, the small coterie of attendants who shepherd her through the day – her hair and make-up people, her publicist, her manager – sing her praises in stage-whispered asides.

Beyond the confines of this comfortable bubble, however, reaction to the singer has been mixed. Since the release of her first album, *Never Never Land*, on the N-Coded label in May of 2000, the buzz surrounding Monheit has assumed gargantuan proportions. As a result, many in the jazz world have asked if she can possibly live up to her own hype. For most, it's a rhetorical question. For others, it's a question that merits considerable debate

Visit any online jazz chat room or discussion forum, for example, and you'll run across someone who thinks that Monheit is either the most fabulously gifted singer to come along since Susannah McCorkle – or that she's a talented windbag: She can't sing, she's trading on her looks, she's stealing attention from singers who are more experienced, more innovative, more homely. The sense of indignation is palpable.

In a rather damning piece published in *The New York Times Magazine* last December ("Things Are What They Used to Be"), writer David Hajdu suggested that Monheit's career has been engineered by Topper and by the president of N-Coded, Carl Griffin. In essence, Hajdu argued that Topper and Griffin, who both approached Monheit after seeing her perform at the 1998 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition, recognized the vocalist as a marketable commodity – a young, attractive singer whose taste for standards coincides with the current trend toward nostalgia – and seized the opportunity to turn a minor talent into a star.

Much of Hajdu's account of Monheit's discovery and subsequent rise is undoubtedly true. But does it justify the extreme degrees of furor and hype that envelop Monheit? Like a whiff of sour air sullyng the sweet fragrance of an otherwise fine spring morning, one nagging question always lingers: Can the lady sing?

"She sounds like Kate [Edwards], but not as good," said the wardrobe person at Monheit's shoot, comparing Monheit to a middling cabaret singer on the New York scene. One of the few in attendance who did not belong to the traveling circus that had accompanied Monheit to Legoff's studio, she was responding to the sound of Monheit's latest CD, *Come Dream with Me*, which played through a portable stereo. Whatever truth there may be to the claim, the unflattering comparison once again illuminated a couple of the criticisms most often leveled at Monheit: that her talent does not warrant the degree of bombast that surrounds her, and that she is indistinguishable from the legions of unremarkable singers toiling in night clubs from coast to coast.

Of course, Monheit does have her supporters, including one prominent Los Angeles-based critic whose writing reflects an admiration for her that borders on infatuation. To date, she has been compared to everyone from Ella Fitzgerald to Betty Carter. The references to Fitzgerald have been especially thick, largely because Monheit herself has often described the swing-era singer as a personal favorite.

In reality, Monheit sounds very little like Fitzgerald – or anyone else, for that matter. And given her vocal skills, that is clearly a matter of choice. In addition to having perfect pitch, she is an excellent mimic and easily could have become a convincing clone had she so desired. Nonetheless, her choice of repertoire – and, more significantly, the way in which she approaches it – does make her sound as if she has stepped out of a time warp. As her producer, Joel Dorn, says, "The first thing I said when I heard her in [a] club was, 'She sounds like a 40 year old chick from 35 years ago.'"

At a time when jazz in general seems to be stuck in reverse, its gaze focused on the glories of yesteryear, Monheit's emphasis on standards sung in a stylistically conservative fashion must have seemed like manna from heaven for those who discovered her. As Topper explains, "I have some gift in finding what I call a talent that has wings, a talent that can soar over fences...and I have another kind of sensibility about what the general culture may be about at the moment."

The general culture in jazz is the result of nearly two decades of stylistic consolidation, in which repertoire ensembles like the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra and documentary retrospectives like Ken Burns "Jazz" have come to define the music for most listeners, and radical experimentation has been relegated to the margins. In part, this is the natural outcome of an artistic trajectory that began decades ago.

Today's young jazz musicians are heirs to a tradition in which the boundaries of harmony, rhythm, and form have already been pushed to their limits, and the question of what remains to be done has no easy answer. Some jazz musicians continue to work at the edge of abstraction; some seek to reconcile the mainstream vocabulary with avant-garde techniques; and others still look to musical genres like rap and world music for fresh inspiration. But those with the most impressive album sales tend to work either within the pop-oriented realm of smooth jazz or at the more conservative end of the neo-conservative spectrum. In this kind of environment, Monheit has a natural advantage.

RAISED ON LONG ISLAND by musical parents – her father plays banjo, and her mother and most of her female relations sing – she began singing as a little girl and quickly developed a taste for the music of an earlier era.

"We sang all the time, my mother and I. We always had records on," Monheit recalls. "I would come home from school, and we would just sing all afternoon. [My mother] studied musical theatre and drama in college, and so that was always a love of hers, as well as old movies – which are kind of directly connected because of all of the movie versions of the great old musicals. So I was just so into that as a child – just watching old movies all the time, dancing around the house."

Not surprisingly, she quickly fell into musical theatre. At the same time, however, she developed a fondness for the bluegrass and folk music favored by her father. And as a teenager, she enjoyed listening to the same pop and rock as her contemporaries – a taste that she retains to this day. "Lately, I've been listening to a lot of rock and stuff like that,"

she says. "Mostly it'll be in the car, like if we're going to a gig in a big old van. We'll be scanning the radio for 80s rock, things like that...It's kind of something that we all share."

After performing in every choir and ensemble offered by her school district, Monheit came to New York City at age 17 to study voice at the Manhattan School of Music. Though she soon began performing a wide variety of music in local bars, she nonetheless experienced the deeply ingrained skepticism with which many veteran jazz musicians greet female vocalists – especially adolescent ones with bubbly dispositions and lots of wavy hair.

"You know, it's hard when you're a very young singer, and suddenly you're thrown in with all of these older guys who are instrumentalists, and there's kind of that thing where, 'Oh, you're a *singer*...you must be *great*,'" she says, rolling her eyes to convey the sarcasm and scorn she encountered.

While at the Manhattan School, Monheit began dating fellow student Rick Montalbano, a drummer who had been playing regularly at Augie's, a club on the Upper West Side, with saxophonist Joel Frahm, pianist David Berkman, and bassist Joe Martin. Invitations to sit in were not immediately forthcoming.

"Everybody knew that I sang," she says, "but it was the kind of thing like, 'Oh, Rick's girlfriend is a singer. Hmm. Isn't *everybody's* girlfriend a singer?'"

Eventually, however, Frahm – who now speaks of Monheit with almost paternal pride – invited her onstage, where she made an immediate impression on audience and musicians alike.

"The first time she sat in, it was just so moving to hear her," recalls Berkman. "She had something very special." Not least of which, her colleagues hasten to add, was the quality of her musicianship. "She's a musician first, who happens to be a singer," Martin emphasizes.

Monheit soon began sitting in regularly with the band, travelling with them on the road, and even performing with them during her senior recital at the Manhattan School. It was the 1998 Monk Competition, however, that definitively launched her career.

Originally eliminated in the vocal semi-finals, Monheit was later invited by the competition's organizers to return for the final round. Though she placed second to seasoned vocalist Teri Thornton, both Griffin and Topper saw a winner in Monheit.

"There was the voice, and there was the look," explains Topper. "There was this fire somewhere in the back of her eyes, and this knowledge of who she was, and this hair, and this overwhelming confidence – confidence not born of ego, but confidence born of being in love with her voice, because she knew that it was not going to fail her."

Judging by her two commercial releases, that confidence is justified. On both *Never Never Land* and *Come Dream with Me*, Monheit comes across as a singer in firm possession of a fine instrument. She delivers tunes like "Hit the Road to Dreamland" and "Please Be Kind" with flawless intonation, careful attention to dynamics and phrasing, and a solid sense of swing. And though she has a tendency to recycle the same devices from tune to tune – and to sing at times as if she were more interested in the sound of her own voice than in the lyrics at hand – she knows how to transform a familiar melody through graceful embellishments and subtle harmonic substitutions.

On both albums, her backing bands are composed of quality, high-profile musicians. Bassist Ron Carter and saxophonists Fathead Newman and Hank Crawford grace *Never Never Land*, while bassist Christian McBride and brassmen Michael Brecker and Tom Harrell appear on *Come Dream with Me*. The pianist on both albums is the widely esteemed Kenny Barron.

Despite the heavy artillery, however, neither recording presents Monheit at her best. Accompanied by musicians with whom she has never worked before, the singer seems restrained and cautious, more studied than stellar. Indeed, it's only when Monheit performs onstage, in the company of her old working band, that she begins to justify the hype.

Performing with Frahm, Berkman, Martin, and Montalbano at a jazz festival on Long Island in August, for example, Monheit seemed an altogether different singer from the one on her recordings. The songs were the same – she was essentially selling *Come Dream with Me*, thus she performed nothing but material from the album – but the singer was transformed.

Surrounded by musicians with whom she shares a genuine rapport, and buoyed by the enthusiastic response of a hometown crowd, Monheit rendered tunes like "So Many Stars" and "Waters of March" with far more daring than she has on record, investing each and every song with emotional, spine-chilling resonance. Bobbing up and down, bending her knees, and pumping her arms at her sides, she seemed constantly in danger of taking flight, both literally and figuratively. And she sang with a combination of joyful abandon and dramatic flair that was absolutely mesmerizing. In this setting, with this band, one thing was patently clear: She really does have the goods. Most definitely, the lady can sing.

That Monheit should sound so good in the company of her old friends is hardly surprising. Aside from their shared history, they are among the finest players on the New York scene. Berkman and Frahm have both recorded superlative albums for the Palmetto label with the likes of Billy Drummond, Brian Blade, and Steve Wilson. Martin, meanwhile, has worked with Andy Bey and collaborated with Vinicius Cantuaria, a rising star of the American-Brazilian music scene. In addition, most of the arrangements that they perform together – and which appear on Monheit's albums – were crafted specifically for Monheit by Berkman, one of the most gifted and distinctive writers in contemporary jazz.

Unfortunately, while her working band is able to draw from Monheit a level of performance that she has yet to achieve on record, those guiding Monheit's career have compelling reasons for surrounding the singer with better-known musicians. "I think it's blunted criticism," N-Coded president Carl Griffin explains. "Because she's white, because she's 21, I feel that I've really had to protect her from the jazz police." In any event, Griffin adds, "Ron Carter won't play behind someone he doesn't believe in, and neither will Kenny Barron."

From a strategic marketing perspective, this is all perfectly sensible. Unfortunately, it has resulted in a body of work that hardly does justice to Monheit's abilities, and that, ironically, has likely generated the kind of criticism Griffin and company had hoped to avoid in the first place. Much of that criticism derives from the quality of Monheit's recordings as well as from the indignation that many feel at seeing a young and (apparently) unremarkable talent promoted beyond reasonable proportions. Those who have heard Monheit perform live with her regular working band, however, are much less likely to grouse about the unfairness of it all.

Monheit has become "sort of a Rorschach test" for the jazz community, Berkman says about the controversy surrounding the singer. "She becomes a metaphor for everything that's happening in jazz. And a lot of things are happening in jazz that aren't good. It's a complicated world – the way art interacts with media, the way art interacts with business – and a lot gets put on Jane, in terms of defining all those things."

While Griffin's "jazz police" grumble at the way in which Monheit's career has been jump-started by strong management and effective publicity, the singer and those around her envision a future in which the opinions of a few jazz commentators will matter less and less. For while Monheit has thus far been positioned as the queen of the retro-garde, she has also begun to edge more closely toward the pop-oriented material.

On *Come Dream with Me*, for example, the ballad "Blame It on My Youth" is bracketed by "If," a soft-pop hit by the '70s band Bread, and by the Joni Mitchell classic, "A Case of You." Taken together, those two tunes signal what Dorn calls "a portent of things to come" – a trial balloon, as it were, meant to gauge the public's response to the kind of non-jazz fare that constitutes such an important part of Monheit's musical universe. Given the success of *Come Dream with Me*, which opened at No. 1 on the *Billboard* jazz charts, plans are already afoot to make further excursions beyond the Great American Songbook on the singer's next album. Indeed, that seems to have been the idea all along.

"[Jane] loves jazz, and she sings easily with great jazz players, so this was a great way to get into the game," explains Dorn. "But her core audience is not just jazz people. You don't sell as many records as she sells just to one kind of person."

Although Monheit and her handlers would like to broaden her appeal, they're careful not to tread on too many toes.

"It's important, I think, always to keep your core audience," the singer explains, "and to reach out to do things differently, to do it in a way that keeps the people that you already have listening. Keep making them happy with your music – but now appeal to a whole other range of people, too."

Whether she can succeed in that regard, only time will tell – a truism that applies to Monheit's career in general. Back in LeGoff's studio, Topper recalled her response to a journalist's question about Monheit's rapid rise: Was it too much, too soon? "This is a prodigy," she replied. "There are different rules for prodigies." Perhaps. But the true test of a prodigy is not how well she performs at age 5 or 10 or 15. It's how well she performs at age 25 or 35 or 45. By that standard, Monheit has yet to fully reveal herself.

Or, as Dorn adroitly puts it, "She's one of those people that's blessed with this incredible instrument – which is great, but it's like being seven-foot-six. Now you gotta go learn how to play basketball."

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