



Robin McKelle: Songbird On The Wing

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By Marcia Hillman Discuss



Robin McKelle's career as a recording artist and a performer is on the rise on both sides of the Atlantic. She is already a jazz star in France and has appeared at the Blue Note and Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola in New York City.

Exposed to music at home by her mother, a musician, McKelle began singing at an early age and playing piano at the age of five. In her early teens, she became interested in jazz. She switched from classical to jazz piano lessons, and her piano teacher also began to coach her with her singing. McKelle went on to attend the

Berklee College of Music and, after graduating, taught voice there for three years. During that time, she entered the Thelonius Monk Vocal Competition and was a winner. Encouraged by DeeDee Bridgewater and Kurt Elling at the competition, Robin focused on singing and released her first CD *Introducing Robin McKelle* (2006) on Cheap Lullaby Records. Her current CD *Modern Antique* (Cheap Lullaby) was released this year and also features a big band configuration. Both CDs have fostered her growing reputation as a jazz vocalist.

All About Jazz: Both of your CDs have been recorded with a big band. Why did you choose this?

Robin McKelle: Well, the first album we did with the big band because of the producer that I was working with. He had this love of big bands; he really wanted to do a project with it. So when we met each other—I met him in L.A.—he said, "Here's what I want to do. Do you want to record?" And I was saying, "No, I'm not ready." So when I was actually finally ready—which was four years later after I had met him originally—we reconnected and we just went with the same idea. It's extremely expensive, but it was something we could do because of the resources he had in the people he was working with in L.A. So we kind of came to an idea together of the concept of the first album. And the follow-up album, *Modern Antique*—I had quite a bit of success with the first album and a lot of success over in Europe. And I was starting to do a lot of touring and having my fan base growing. It was something different. And a lot of times I heard it's great because there are trios and even smaller pieces. It's just more affordable. And not only that, artistically, it's just a completely different thing. So it was kind of like the follow-up to *Introducing Robin McKelle*, and I really felt like it was the right thing to do—another big band album but with just a little bit of a different flair, a little different touch to it. It still has some of the swing to it that a lot of the people really love and I love as well. But I kind of got a chance to go into more of a bluesy approach.

AAJ: Torchy type.

RM: Yes, which I really love. So it kind of used the big band in some of the same ways but some different ways as well. So it kind of gives a little bit of a different side to it.



AAJ: Basically, what you're doing is situating yourself in the '40s and '50s, where vocalists used to record with big bands.

RM: Yes, everybody did. And, as long as the arrangements are really great and the players are great, it can be a great experience.

AAJ: Chris Connor—who was originally a band singer—sailed over the band, and that's exactly what you do. You're not overwhelmed by the band. You're still out in front and the band is right behind you; you are not a "band singer."

RM: Well, thank you. I love her and I love her voice and she's got such a great timbre to her voice—the sound and the raspiness of it. It is hard—the big band. It's a very powerful sound and there's a lot of sound and you can't be a competition, but you do have to have a bigger voice to do the big band thing, because otherwise you're going to get overwhelmed. It is a different style of singing and I do find that I love it. But there are other times when I'm on tour and I just travel with a trio.

AAJ: Although you've recorded with the big band and you're performing that way, you're certainly not going to travel with a big band—it's not feasible any more. What do you have to do to tone down your approach when working with a smaller group?

RM: I approach it differently, usually. For some of the songs, we'll do similar arrangements, but because the instrumentation is different, the singing style is a bit different as well. It's toned down for sure. I'm not out there really—less crooning, I would say, and more freedom of interpretation. And there's much more interaction with the other musicians. When I'm playing with my trio, we do different arrangements of the tunes that are on the albums. We'll do kind of a fusion—something that sounds familiar from the album, but in a way that works with a trio. You cannot recreate the sound with a trio.

AAJ: No, it's impossible. When you've got a blasting brass section, you cannot do it with a trio.

RM: Right. And actually, now I have a couple of forms. I have a group now with three horns—trumpet, trombone and saxophone—and sometimes we have done some of the bigger concerts, festivals and shows. It's really fun as well, because it gives the elements and the sound of the horns, but it's more open because it's kept to three horns. So it's just a different approach. With the trio thing, too, when I'm touring a lot I try to change it up a little bit every night. I don't want to go out and do the same thing. We might do the same song and change the tempo or change the feel sometimes. You've got to do those things. That's the thing about jazz.

AAJ: That's the wonderful part about jazz. You never hear the same thing twice—you have a set arrangement but then you take off from there.

AAJ: How did your singing career start off?

RM: I grew up singing all the time but I started off mostly singing in the bands and doing this and doing that and whatever, but a lot of singing at weddings—tons of weddings. I moved out to L.A. after I graduated from Berklee and I pursued a job as a background singer. So, then I was a

background singer and then I realized, "No, this is so not what I want." But it was great life experience, traveling all over the world and weeding out: "This is what I want; this is what I don't want." I moved back to Boston and I was offered a teaching position at Berklee. I never, ever wanted to teach and I never saw myself teaching, but I really felt I couldn't turn it down. I was honored to be offered the job. I thought, "You know what, I'll do one day a week and I'll see how it works for me," and then I started to teach a little bit more and I was still singing at weddings and everything. I was always working on my own music, but I needed to pay the bills, too.



There was a colleague of mine who suggested that I enter the Monk competition. At the time, honestly, I had studied jazz but I was really making a living as an R&B singer. What I was singing, of course was influenced by jazz, but my writing was more pop than jazz-influenced. I thought, "Well, it's the last year I could possibly do it because I'll be over the age limit the next time, so I might as well try it. I sent the CD in and I got accepted to the semifinals, and I honestly couldn't believe it. When I went there I said, "I'm just gonna go

and enjoy this experience," and then ended up in the final four, thinking, "I can't believe this." Honestly, I didn't think I had what it really took to be a jazz singer because the people I listened to and was influenced by were so far on a level that I thought I could never achieve. I guess everyone goes through that. And then, here I am standing on a stage with four other women. And then I was one of the winners, and I'm sitting there and Kurt Elling and DeeDee Bridgewater were really, really encouraging. They both came to me personally. They were amazing. They just said, "You're already doing this." Kurt said to me, "We need to hear you out there. You need to be doing this because people need to hear you. Keep in touch with me. Anything you need, call me." He gave me his phone number. So then I really had the encouragement from the people that I looked up to and that I was so in awe of. I didn't realize that this was the territory where I really fit in. I had found my niche.

And then I decided to record *Introducing Robin McKelle*. The real story with *Introducing* is, the producer Willie Murillo, whom I had met four years previously, had been begging me, "I want to record you." When I lived in L.A., there were not a ton of jazz singers out there. Most of the jazz singers were in New York in early 2000. I started to get some calls about doing some pop symphony Orchestra dates. So I thought, "This is better than doing weddings. I would like to do this." I started singing standards with orchestra—totally fully orchestra. The conductor started to mentor me a little bit. His name is Jeff Prysick. He was in Rochester, New York. And he said, "If you want to do more of these, you should come up with a concept that you can sell to these orchestras." I thought this was pretty cool because I was singing on a stage and people were listening to me. I'm not singing where people are requesting "I Will Survive." I'm very rational and I thought, "This seems do-able." So I picked up the phone and I had a very small budget of about seven or eight thousand dollars that I collected. And I said, "Can we do this?" "Yes, let's do it. Can you get more money?" At first I had five thousand and I had to get a little more. Seventy-five hundred, I think I actually came up with. That's what we recorded the first album on.

AAJ: That's very good. Especially with the full orchestra you got there.

RM: Willie called in favors. It was the love of the music from all of the musicians. They wanted to play this music.

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So we finished and I started getting more of the pop beat and now I had my arrangements for a big band and I got an interview on NPR, and it just popped for me. And it was by accident, because I'd originally said I was gonna do this project, but I'm recording my original music. And this was really what was my break—I didn't have a manager. I didn't have an agent. I didn't have anything. I had nothing. I'm lucky, knock on wood, that I found an agent, but it was after. It's a very confusing and frustrating business and stressful and crazy.

I started doing well here in the States and an independent label from France connected with my label here and said, "Okay, we want to sign her in France and we want to bring her over to tour." And my label said, "This is great for you because you're going to tour there." They did a really great job. The record did really, really great in France and I got with one of the best agents there. He liked what I did. He started booking me. I played at the JVC Jazz Festival in a 150 seat place the first time I was there. I did really well.

AAJ: What year was this?

RM: It was 2006. That was in October, and then they had me back in December to do two nights there at the New Morning Jazz Club. It's a 500-seat theater with two shows—500 people each show—with a big band from Paris. I did that. It was a local big band. It was tough, but it worked out okay. And it just kept going. Then I played at a 1,500 seat theater in May, and it was sold out. And France is quite...

AAJ: France is quite different. It has always been ahead of the time when it comes to jazz anyway.

RM: That's the truth, and a lot of people have gone there. DeeDee herself spent many years there.



Buble.

AAJ: Norah Jones, to many, is not jazz.

And then Blue Note France decided they were really interested in me so they put the second album out in Europe. I'm still on an indie label here for this. I've worked hard for it my whole life. It's still a journey—it's still getting more and it's trying to enjoy it and stay in the moment and be grateful. And it's much different here in the U.S. It's difficult everywhere, but...

AAJ: It's still an orphan here.

RM: Right. It's very true. But you can also imagine why, because many times in our lives, you don't really know; when you always have something, you don't know what it's really worth—the value of it. And I really do think there has been a slight resurgence of jazz in today's music, with Diana Krall and Norah Jones and Michael

RM: Not jazz, but opens the door to people possibly hearing music in a different way.

AAJ: You write your own material—both music and lyrics. You want to do more of your own stuff.

RM: I do, definitely.

AAJ: Do you have anything definite in mind?

RM: Yes, my next album. I don't think it's going to be all originals because I think it would be straying way too far from where I'm at stylistically, so I feel like a gentle kind of progression into that.

AAJ: Maybe two or three albums down the line.

RM: Yes. But I know I'm going to have more and more. So I'll do a couple more original tunes and I'll keep introducing more. And—because I'm still new to a lot of people and, first of all, they hear this big band record and then here's me with a trio which is a totally different story—I don't want to scare them away. I think they're already surprised because it's a different thing. That's where my home is—on stage. Recording is okay for me. The stage is where I feel...I love performing.

AAJ: Well, performing and studio work are two different things.

RM: Completely different. I prefer to do everything live and, it was just impossible with a full big band and strings. We had to do it in sections and I sang with the rhythm section until after they tracked everything. It's more like a pop approach to the record and that's not really where I come from musically. I like to have it going on. It's like, right in the moment.



AAJ: Like it was in the studios in the '30s and the '40s—one track. And the band is there and just does it.

RM: That's what I want. And I really want to make a live recording at some point. I definitely want to do a live recording.

AAJ: That may not be a bad idea for your next album.

RM: Yes. I want to do it a lot. Things get complicated when you have more people on your team and they're great to help but they all have ideas and suggestions. And on labels, it's a tough climate right now. They want me to do what I want to do, but they also don't want it to be, like, I want to

do an acoustic folk album and they'll say, "You can't do that." So I do have creative freedom. I'm producing it myself.

AAJ: You want creative control.

RM: I had a lot more on the second one, and that was really important to me. Choice of material. Like I said, the first one was based around this concept of the '40s. So that's what we did. And this one, it's very important for me to have creative control—not full control, but input, and a lot of it. I have a vision. I know what I want. I know what I hear. I write. I arrange. I do it. I know what I want to hear. It almost got there for me on Modern Antique. It almost got there. But there's so many things involved, and as the process goes, it morphs into something else sometimes. And you have to accept it and that's what it is when you're co-producing and then you have...I'm on

four different labels. I have a manager. There are other people and you have to be okay with letting go a little bit. You have to let go. And it wasn't so hard; I feel like I work with people who I trust. But once it comes down to it, I want most of the control musically and I got a lot of what I needed. But artistically, I wanted different photos. I wanted this and I wanted that and at the end of the day, I'm like, "You know what? The music is my baby. Yes, I'll be okay with that photo for this or whatever." But people have different ideas of what they want, and sometimes it's just not worth my energy.

AAJ: You have to focus in on what's your job. It's the music.

RM: Yes. You cannot control everything because it will make you crazy. And I've got too much to worry about. I've been on tour. I've only had probably a total of two and a half months off this year, so I'm on the road all the time with my band. I've got to deal with three musicians, let's put it that way. They're great guys but they're three different personalities. We're on tour, we're all tired and I'm doing a lot of promo while we're doing shows. And I can't worry about things like that. I have people to help me with that.

AAJ: You're lucky about having a manager because that's what managers are supposed to do: "I'll take care of this. I'll just tell you where to show up. You just show up and do your thing."

RM: Yes. I have a great manager. I'm very fortunate. I connected with a manager who has been around forever and worked with greats—worked with Miles Davis. You don't work with people like that. You know, artists in general have their quirks, and when you're a good manager, you can see that. I have my own things. I get nervous—not performing, but figuring out, "Where do I have to be? What time? Am I supposed to do this?" These types of things—scheduling types of things. And a good manager says, "Don't worry. You go here. You do this. And you eat at this time." And it's great. Not only that. It's your business. Someone is representing you and it's important to me that that person is professional and timely.

AAJ: There are two few good managers, unfortunately, because managing is 24/7. Booking is 24/7. And for somebody to go into this, they have to make a huge commitment.



RM: A huge commitment. I'm really fortunate. I have a great team—agent and manager in Europe and I've some good people here as well. But I'm just fortunate now to even have a manager.

AAJ: You're fortunate to have gigs.

RM: Yes! I'm fortunate for all of these things. But, yes, the gigs.

AAJ: You're doing Dizzy's and it's just the one night.

RM: I leave the next day for France. I have three months in Europe.

AAJ: Are you going to be doing any more gigs in the States?

RM: Yes. We're booking right now in January and February. Right now we're going to be at the Blue Note January 30, 31 and February 1. That's good. And we have some stuff in DC and Boston.

AAJ: Are they still doing things at the jazz room at the Kennedy Center?

RM: I think they do it in the spring. I think they're booked for two years. I think we might be doing it the next time. They're pretty far in advance. A lot of those places book their seasons so far in advance.

AAJ: The beauty of what's happened in New York City during the last four or five years is that there are a lot more jazz venues than there have been in a long time. Maybe it's because we're getting a lot of tourists from Europe and they like jazz and they want to hear it, but there are a lot of new rooms and a lot of restaurants utilizing jazz performers.

RM: There are a lot of venues here. I lived in Boston for ten years. There's two places. And there were many more when I first moved there. There were more and they've closed. It's tough to get people out because it's full of students. And they can't afford it, number one. They want to go out and hang out. They don't want to go out and hear jazz. Some of the music students do, but they can't afford it. It's not easy for them to afford fifteen or twenty dollars a ticket, and that's pretty reasonable, too. It's tough. I know it is in Dizzy's. It's a very high-end place. I know there's not a lot of musicians that go in there. But people are going there.

AAJ: There are two other spaces up there. The Allen Room would be a wonderful room for you to do a concert in. Either that or the Rose. The Rose is larger.

RM: I guess at this point, especially here, it's building my name. Because now at least I'm getting the gigs and I'm getting the dates. It's going well. But really, for what I want to do, I can't be here. I can't do a weekly gig or this or that.

AAJ: You can't do a weekly gig unless you're a Blossom Dearie or somebody that's around all the time.

RM: You can't do it. I'm on tour. That's the thing, and if I can play two times a year in New York—maybe, luckily, three—that would be great. I was actually considering moving here and I just thought, "Why? I'm going to pay a whole bunch of money to be on the road and then when I come back, what am I going to do? I'm not going to get a gig. When I'm playing in theaters and I'm asked to do the festivals and things, it would be great if I could get my band together for this gig and work out some music. But it would be virtually impossible, because when I'm not on tour, I'm either taking care business that I haven't been able to, or recording. So my life has really changed. And I'm totally lucky. I loved teaching. I loved singing in the wedding band. I'm very grateful for that gig because I paid my rent with it and I learned a lot. I grew a lot; I did. And my students—I loved their energy. They were so excited. They were 18 and thinking, "I'm gonna be a star. I'm gonna be a musician." You know, you've done it for ten years and maybe you're jaded and bitter—I wasn't, really—but you see the reality of what's coming. And it kind of becomes, here's the reality and you're got to make a living and it's not like...you still have the dream. In terms of the glamour, I was on tour with a rock band, and I'll tell you what—frankly, it's great if that's your dream, but it's hard work. Not a lot of singing; a lot of traveling. Not a lot of gratification.

AAJ: A lot of moving amps.

RM: Thank God, I didn't have to do that.

AAJ: So, basically, your future is more of the same.

RM: Yes. I hope so. More of the same. It's tough being on the road because I'm a real homebody and I love being home. I love cooking. So I've had a month off and a month doing a lot of things that are not my forte. And I can't tell you how excited I am to start singing again.

AAJ: Dizzy's is a good room to do it.

RM: I just feel the last time I was here was at the Blue Note and it was my first show in New York and I remember the energy in that room—being in New York and the people. It's amazing.

Selected Discography

Robin McKelle, *Modern Antique* (Cheap Lullaby, 2008)

Robin McKelle, *Introducing Robin McKelle* (Cheap Lullaby, 2006)