

WAG



MELISSA ERRICO

Broadway star
and Yorkie mom

GRETCHEN CARLSON
Empowering women —
and her Water Dog

**DESIGNER
CAROLYNE ROEHM**
'Going to the Dogs'
exquisitely

**ART AND
ANIMAL LOVERS**
James and Susan
Dubin, Bob and
Karen Madden

**THE ORPHAN
ELEPHANTS OF
UMANI SPRINGS**

**CREATURES
OF THE NIGHT**
Speakeasy-crawling
in WAG country

*critters &
visionaries*





Melissa Errico.
Photographs by Jenny Anderson.

LEGRAND AFFAIR' AVEC MICHEL

BY GREG SHAPIRO

Actress and singer Melissa Errico has had a professional, musical love affair with the late composer Michel Legrand since she was a child, with Legrand's music playing in her parents' house while she was growing up. She received a Tony Award nomination for her portrayal of Isabelle in Legrand's 2002 Broadway musical "Amour." So it's no surprise that Errico's 2011 album "Legrand Affair" (Ghostlight), a musical celebration of and collaboration with Legrand, was reissued in a deluxe edition in late 2019, a few months after the Oscar-winning composer of "The Windmills of Your Mind" and "Summer of '42" and "Yentl" passed away at the age of 86. I had the pleasure of speaking to Melissa - a Bronxville resident who is the wife of tennis star/commentator Patrick McEnroe and mother of three girls, plus Yorkshire Terrier Pepper - before her concert tour, which includes performances at Feinstein's/54 Below in May:

Melissa, I'd like to begin by expressing my gratitude to you for recording Joni Mitchell's song "Night Ride Home" on your 2003 debut album "Blue Like That." I'm grateful to you for recording something from Joni's later catalog instead of something from her early 1970s albums as many other singers tend to do. Why did you choose that song?

"My brother (Mike Errico), who is a very innovative singer/songwriter, was a big in-

fluence at that time on that record. He's a professor in songwriting at the Clive Davis Institute (of Recorded Music) at (New York University). He was always playing his guitar in his lap, doing very weird capos and tunings. He worshipped Joni Mitchell. A lot of my love and appreciation for her was not what was popular or mainstream. It was deep music to Mike and he was a big part of making that album. I credit him for putting me on to that and for being his own kind of pioneer.

"I was trying to bring a mix of singer/songwriter material to my vocalist and Broadway acting background. I think I took to it because it was a beautiful poem/story - the visual of the horse following the car. I was, at the time, looking for a way to deal with my first big heartbreak. We were drawn to the imagery and drawn to Joni as a songwriter. The song is beautiful."

Is there an especially fond memory that you have from your creative relationship with Michel that you would like to share with the readers?

"I wrote the eulogy for Michel Legrand in The New York Times. This big appraisal of Michel is what got the reissue rolling. My father was a concert pianist who was drafted to Vietnam. He was obsessed with Michel Legrand's music. When you think about Legrand, it's actually period music. Most of it comes out of the 1960s. My parents were

bonded by the (Legrand) song 'I Will Wait For You,' which was like an anthem for people separated by the Vietnam war. That song resonated with Americans. When I was growing up (in Manhasset, Long Island) in the '70s, Michel Legrand was played in our house. My father would relax playing Michel's music. The music was so dreamy and languorous and seductive. My relationship with Michel started in my parents' house.

"When I was in my early 30s, I got the audition for 'Amour' on Broadway. I was living in Hollywood and had been in Broadway and off-Broadway musicals and had done tons of television and film. I had this Hollywood manager who was perplexed that this fax came through about an audition in New York for this new musical. James Lapine is the director and they wanted me to fly all the way to New York to audition. I looked at the paper and it said, 'Music by Michel Legrand.' I said, 'Michel Legrand wrote a musical?' My manager turned to me and said, 'I know. I love her.'"

Oh, no. Did you fire her on the spot?

"I fired, her, yes. I didn't fire her right that second, but yes. I went to New York and I got the part. I was in the room with Michel Legrand. It didn't take him 24 hours before he realized that I knew everything about him. I didn't just know it, I loved it. I had a wonderful working relationship with Michel. I got to know him well. I did his play. We did the original 'Legrand Affair' album. I was slow in getting it done. We recorded the initial tracks in 2005 but didn't release it until 2011. It was because I had three children. I also had a lot of people giving me their two cents about the orchestrations. In the long run, long before Michel died, I decided to defend his eccentricity and let it blaze. It got wonderful reviews, but I'm sure it confounded people. It's funny, you know what he was inspired by? He was inspired by Joni Mitchell's album with strings."

"Both Sides Now," from 2000.

"You have a very good sensibility. I had never thought about that. Also, the Shirley Horn album 'Here's To Life.' Those were his two inspirations from his sensibility toward me. He thought I was like folk meets Ravel meets jazz. I just reissued 'Legrand Affair' with the demos, the practice sessions that led up to the recording."

In May 2020, you will be performing "Amour & After - Melissa Errico Sings the Music of Michel Legrand" at Feinstein's/54 Below.

"The show I am bringing to New York is a written show. It has commentary in it that I hope is funny and philosophical. I've been doing shows lately that have a through line, a script. I've heard people call it a 'cabareessay.' It's the talking, as well, that people get excited by. It's co-written by Adam Gopnik, this writer from *The New Yorker*."

We are speaking on the morning of the Academy Award nominations. In his lifetime, Michel Legrand won three Oscars and received 10 nominations. Do you think the days of Legrand style movie theme songs are a thing of the past or that they might come around again?

"I love that you asked that. I don't see it as nostalgia or a period piece to sing his music. His music is about a lot of things. One of them is sensuality without sexuality. When I do 'His Eyes, Her Eyes' from 'The Thomas Crown Affair' or 'The Summer Knows' from 'Summer of '42,' it's not just about sexuality. It reminds you that at that time it wasn't just a grab'n' go culture. Things took time. It's a reflection of permanent values that people loved."

Over the course of your recording career, you have recorded an album of Michel Legrand songs, as well as an album of Ste-

phen Sondheim songs. Is there someone you have in mind for another themed album?

"I definitely do have a couple of other ideas up my sleeve. I've started to do a swing show. It started in 2017 because of Adam Gopnik. It's a little political, only in so far as the American Songbook is made up of immigrants and people who changed their names. Harry Warren was (born) Salvatore Guaragna and Jewish names like Irving Berlin (who was Isidore Beilin). It's the idea that the American Songbook is not at all so-called American. It's a wondrous and mixed bag of people. Most of them were on the (1950s) blacklist and didn't have passports. The American swing album/talk show/cabareessay is fun, because people are getting all of these ideas about feminism and immigration and Jewishness and the incredible creativity of the time and the wars."

In addition to your theater and concert work, you talked about being in Hollywood, having done a lot of film and TV work. Are there any upcoming projects that you'd like to mention?

"The only film thing is coming up this April on PBS. It's a documentary on Sondheim. It's for (the) 'Poetry In America' (series). I filmed it seven or eight months ago. I'll be speaking, as well as singing something from 'Sunday in the Park With George.' It's a beautiful documentary I worked hard on with a small group of people. The focus of the documentary is on gender, if you reversed some of the gender of Sondheim's songs and what they would mean. The one we developed the most was 'Finishing The Hat' from 'Sunday in the Park with George.'"

Finally, you live in Bronxville with your husband, tennis star and ESPN commentator Patrick McEnroe, and your daughters. How long have you lived in Bronxville and what was the appeal to you to settle there with your family?

"We wanted to give the girls more space and a wonderful school but also a chance to grow up a bit freer to roam. For us, Bronxville had it all. Plus, we needed a place with easy access to tennis courts for our eldest, who is a competitive junior player. It was also an easy commute to the city for the two younger children, twins Diana and Juliette, newly age 11, who are dancers and commute in four to five days a week."

"Ultimately, Bronxville became about the chance to have a house and absolutely wonderful neighbors. We've made terrific friends here. The first year we moved in, we participated in a great block party and offered to convert our lawn into a talent show, which quickly became a fundraiser for The Scarlett Fund (of Manhattan Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center – Pediatrics), named after one of my city friends whose child is a survivor and a great inspiration. There are talent shows all around the U.S. for this cause, and Bronxville has such great and generous kids and families who perform. Even if you do tricks with a lacrosse stick, that counts as talent. I love decorating and draping our house with striped circus fabric and seeing kids do Irish dancing or hip hop on our lawn. You can't do that in SoHo."

Are there particular Westchester County spots that have become favorites for you?

I don't go often but I have been to Bronxville Wellness Center for classes and meditation. Underhills Crossing restaurant is always a special night out favorite. For groovy clothes? Toney Toni and The Gang has everything – dresses, shoes and the prettiest beaded jewelry. Many McEnroe tennis hours have been clocked in at (Sportime) Lake Isle (home of brother-in-law John McEnroe's tennis academy)." 

Melissa Errico performs May 28 through 30 at Feinstein's/54 Below, 254 W. 54th St., Manhattan. For more, visit 54below.com/melissa.

