

Kellylee Evans

A Conversation With Kellylee Evans

Artist Interview by: [Kevin Cox](#)

Try to put singer/songwriter Kellylee Evans into any one musical category, and marvel as she effortlessly soars over, glides under, dances around, or bursts through it. Her electric, eclectic, vibe is a heady brew of jazz, soul, blues, caribbean, and more. Evans gained worldwide recognition as runner-up in the 2004 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition, and her recently released debut CD, *Fight or Flight*, has inspired comparisons to Erykah Badu, and Cassandra Wilson. JazzReview caught up with the Canadian diva to discuss her CD and more.



JazzReview: Your debut CD, *Fight or Flight*, has made quite an impression on critics and a very diverse audience.

Things seem to be going very well for you right now. Is all of this coming as a bit of a surprise to you, or is this where you always new you'd be?

Kellylee Evans: I think it's where I always wanted to be, and I think it's where people always hoped I'd be, but I think everything is still a surprise. People still come up to me after shows and they say "Oh man, this is it - you're going to make it now", you know? I've been hearing that since I was little, and it's only now that I'm doing anything to try and make that happen. I'm actually working hard to get the music out there. Before I wasn't really sure what to do to get ahead in the music industry. It just seemed like, "Okay, well, I can sing and I'm singing, so...". You feel like this big entity is going to swoop down on you and find you and take you, and I'm sure that happens to some people, but it didn't happen to me. And because that didn't happen I thought, "I guess I can't be that good, or maybe I really don't have anything to say." But now that I take control of my own destiny and do my own thing - put the CD out, book my own shows - I get more help now than I did when I wasn't doing anything.

JazzReview: You've been singing for quite a while, since you were a little girl in fact. You started out in church?

Kellylee Evans: I was never in the church choir or anything like that. We just had one of those churches where it didn't matter if you were in the choir or not, you'd be singing. It really helped foster a love of music for me. And also singing in school, at school functions - I had my first solo when I was in kindergarten. So yeah, I've been singing since I was little, but never structured singing, never taking classes or anything. Finally, when I was in high school I joined a choir, but up to that point I just did things here or there,.

JazzReview: At what point did you become aware that you were especially gifted as

a singer, and at what point did you begin singing jazz?

Kellylee Evans: I always felt that my singing generated a big response in people from the first time I sang publicly. I couldn't point to any particular time that I became aware of it. People would ask me to sing at funerals and assemblies, and so on... That was just what I did. Jazz came much later. I was in University and my boyfriend at the time, now my husband, had a roommate whose girlfriend mentioned that she had traveled to New Orleans in high school with jazz bands, and how great it was. I was like "Oh, that's really interesting!" and she said, "Yeah, but you could never learn jazz, it would be too difficult for you." I was like, "What?! Oh, Really?" That just kind of set me off and running.

I would study a singer a month. February would be Ella Fitzgerald, March would be Mel Torme, April would be DeeDee Bridgewater, and so on. I would go to the library and get every CD that I could find on that artist. I would borrow from friends, and buy CDs when I could afford them, because I was still in University. And I would just study. If there was a bio written on them, I would find it. I would just bone up on them and their repertoire, add their repertoire to mine, and move on to the next singer. That's kind of the way I did it.

It would be more impressive if I actually remembered anything (laughs). For me, it's cumulative and I know why I learned those things at the time - I just needed to get my jazz sensibility down. That was definitely the time that I developed my love for jazz. Around that time I was kind of wandering around campus and I noticed that there was a music department that I had never noticed before, and I noticed that they had jazz combos. So this was my first opportunity to actually play with other musicians. They found musicians who were floating around and wanted to play with other people, and they got us all together. For all of us, it was the first time we had encountered a jazz combo setting, and that's how I started singing jazz.

JazzReview: You mentioned that at some point you took your career into your own hands. How did that evolve?

Kellylee Evans: I had done my own songs and I wanted to get them out there, but I realized that to get a gig, people wanted to hear the songs--and to get people to come to the gig you have to promote it, usually with your music. People would have to have heard your music, hopefully on the radio. In order to get played on the radio, you have to have a good CD. So everything was pointing back to the CD. So when I knew I had my own songs, I wanted to make the best CD I could make.

I had met Lonnie Plaxico at a jazz festival in 2001 here in Ottawa. I got my songs together and sent them off to him and he said, "Hey, these are great." I gave him a sense of who I wanted to play with and what sound I wanted, and he put it all together for me. I went to New York in late December of 2003, stayed through Christmas and recorded in the beginning weeks of January 2004. I remember Lonnie and the guys listened to the product and they said, "You know, this is really good enough for a label. You should really try to shop it to a label." Up to that point, I figured I would just release it myself and move on, but they convinced me that it would be worth a try. So I went off and got started trying to get that CD out.

Mostly, I sent it to places in Canada. The really interesting thing about sending it to those places in Canada was that it wasn't like I didn't get any response - most people don't get even a phone call back, but people would call me and say, "This is really great stuff, I just don't know that there is a market for it here in Canada." I really didn't know what to do at that point.

I'd always watched for the Monk competition [ed: Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition]. I knew that Jane Monheit had done well, and I knew that it came every three or four years. I had always been checking to see when the next voice competition was, but in 2004, I never bothered to check until Lonnie Plaxico called me and told me they were doing voice that year and that I should try to get in. So I applied and I was accepted. I was so shocked because it was something that I needed.

It's funny - after making the CD I was saying "Man, I just can't seem to get anybody interested. I need to be in a competition," and then boom, Lonnie calls. I sent off the application and thought "Man, it would be amazing to meet Quincy Jones", and boom, Quincy Jones is one of the judges. It was one of those weird things where you're just calling out for things you would love to see and then all of a sudden, the universe is like "Here you go, here you go." (laughs)

I thank that competition for so much, because it solidified things for me here in Canada, in the sense that I was able to use that to gain a lot of publicity - the fact that I was going down for this major international competition in America - I got a lot of radio play, and I got a lot of press in the newspaper. Not winning created it's own press (laughs). All of a sudden, now it was not so challenging to make phone calls to booking agents or to venues. All of a sudden, people were interested in getting my phone call, not super-interested, but more interested.

JazzReview: And you did very well in that competition.

Kellylee Evans: Second place.

JazzReview: Out of 160 entrants.

Kellylee Evans: It's amazing...

JazzReview: Who are some of the other vocalists from that competition class of 2004 that really impress you?

Kellylee Evans: Everybody seems to be doing there own thing differently. Robin McKelle is amazing, and Gretchen Parlato has this really neat, world vibe, you know? Everybody has their own unique style. Everybody had something that somebody somewhere could identify with.

JazzReview: It seems that everyone wants to put you into a certain category - urban jazz, jazzy, r&b flavored jazz... Do you struggle with labels?

Kellylee Evans: Yes, initially I did. Before, when I was doing standards, I had a certain fan base and I knew what they wanted to hear. It was hard for me to even put my own stuff out because I knew it was going to be so different from what I had done. Even now, I look ahead to where I want the next CD to be, and I think it's going to be different from this last CD. But that jazz feel is still there. At first I fought it, but then I realized it just is what it is, and people get there own feel for it based on what they want to hear. Some of the stuff is a lot more world-influenced and some of the stuff is a lot more jazzy. The biggest thing I've noticed about the CD is that people play it on all kinds of stations. I'll get a call from a blues station and they'll be spinning the bluesy track "I Don't Think I Want To Know." A jazz station will pick up "How Can You Get Along Without Me." A smooth jazz station will be playing "What About Me" or "Who Knows." It doesn't seem to have a home on any one genre of radio, and I'm okay with that because I really don't have a home in any one place either. And if you come to my house, you're not going to get any one style

of food. The music fits me and it's very representative of me and the way I was raised, and the way that I still live. It's okay that people can't find a strict category for it. I'm okay with that - I'm not really on a label, so I don't feel the need to justify to the stockholders or anything like that. Know what I mean? (laughs)

JazzReview: Going back to when you were studying a singer a month, which ones stuck with you more than the others?

Kellylee Evans: Definitely Ella Fitzgerald, Carmen McRae, and Abbey Lincoln - especially when I became open to listening not just to standards, but to songs written by the singers. It just seemed like there was something else going on there from an expressive standpoint. I became less obsessed with vocal perfection and more obsessed with what people were saying and what message they had, and could I too have a message. So for me, Abbey Lincoln probably helped the most with me finding my own voice.

JazzReview: You've been compared to people such as Erykah Badu and Cassandra Wilson. Who would you compare yourself to in terms of your style right now?

Kellylee Evans: I think those are pretty close...I can hear a bit of both of them, I can hear a bit of Sade. I know that for my writing style, I was listening to a lot of Shania Twain too, because I thought that it was really interesting the way that she was able to write music that people identified with. She was more interested in making people happy and making them feel that they could relate. I wanted to make music like that as well because that's the kind of music that I most identify with--music that's not simple, but somehow you get it.

When people start to tell you stories about how your music has affected them, or that you are speaking for them, or that when they need to get through a bad day they listen to the CD, that kind of stuff just blows my mind. The music becomes not about me. It extends beyond me, and that is exciting.

JazzReview: Your CD, *Fight or Flight* has been very well received. Fight or flight - what does that mean to you?

Kellylee Evans: The song "Fight or Flight" is subtitled "Help Me Help You." When I wrote that song, it was all about being apathetic in society and just never feeling that you can help in the world, because anything you do is not good enough, it's not big enough. Nothing that "little me" could do could possibly help to actually solve any of the problems in society. I sense this apathy on the part of people of my generation. I wrote this song from the sense of asking the person who's in trouble to help me help you, because I'm not sure I want to, and this whole sense of not knowing - should I fight or should I just run away? That idea of fighting or running away just keeps coming back through my life in every situation. It has to do with whether I choose to work in music or not - am I going to fight for this dream I have to be a performer, or am I just going to run from it and find something easier to do, something with less risk? Am I going to fight and let the band know exactly how I want to hear the song, or am I just going to sit back and be unhappy with the results? There are just so many different ways everyday that I have to choose to fight or fly. Some days I'm proud of myself because I fought, and some days I have to forgive myself for running.

JazzReview: What are your favorite tracks on the CD?

Kellylee Evans: From a listening standpoint, there are two songs that I really love - the first version of "What About Me" and "Hooked." Those are two songs where I'm

pretty happy about where things went.

JazzReview: So what's in store for you over the next few months? Are you thinking about your next CD?

Kellylee Evans: We're just starting to push this CD, but I worked on it so long ago and spent so much time playing the game with the labels, that it's old material to me - new material to everyone else. When we perform, almost 50 percent of the music we do is new stuff. So I want to move on too...but how can you be a rational business person and give *Fight or Flight* an opportunity to grow properly, but also be a happy artist and feel like I'm still creating and not just recycling (laughs)? I would love to go in this winter and record a new CD, just to get it down. It would be neat to put it out for next festival season. I've got two CDs, at least, in my head.

For more about information : www.kellyleeevans.com