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Home ▶ Information ▶ CD Reviews ▶ Johanna Sillanpaa's "Good Life"

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Johanna Sillanpaa's "Good Life"

Written by Joe Montague
Friday, 02 February 2007



Johanna Sillanpaa

When I first met jazz vocalist Johanna Sillanpaa we were seated in the Good Earth Café near downtown Calgary. In between sips of her coffee and nibbling on her light breakfast, the Swedish singer with the porcelain skin and delicate features talked about her 2006 release of the CD *Good Life*.

"When I wrote *Good Life* (the CD), it took a long time for me to finish that CD. Some of it was my own neurotic and some of it my own perfectionist (tendencies). I wasn't ready to let it go yet and finally said, 'That's enough release it now and move on.' That's the thing as a writer you are only going to get better as you grow. The worst thing you can do is to stay on something for so long that by the time you release it, it becomes dated. My goal is to write as much music as I can and to keep recording."

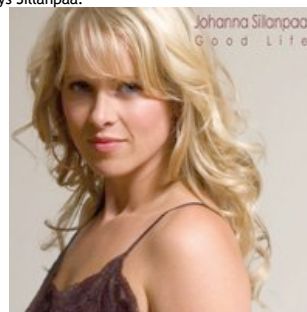
The CD *Good Life* is at times introspective with the artist's moodier darker side surfacing in "One More Day". "It is sometimes easier to think about hard stuff and get inspiration from that. I find that sometimes it is easier to tap into whether it is love relationships or friendships," she says.

It is a bit ironic that the title track "Good Life" a song that was the last one to be added to the CD is at the other end of the emotional scale from "One More Day". "I always have a tendency to lean towards the darker brooding stuff so I said to Sheldon Zandboer one day that I just needed a lighter song. I needed a song that makes you feel good and is more upbeat. We were playing and that one was born out of improvisation," she says.

"When these songs were born it was definitely the mood of the music that brought on the lyric and the melody. Some of the songs started with, 'Let's just get together and jam. Let's start with a blank page, no words, no chords, nothing.' You just start playing something and then an idea is born. You find a verse then you move on to a chorus and you build it like that. That is a very loose form of writing. I really like that because you are able to be as creative as you want to be and you can go anywhere," says Sillanpaa.

Improvisation plays a big role in the music of Johanna Sillanpaa. "Ideas are born out of improvisation all of the time and we do not remember them," she laments. As a reminder she says, "I don't know how many times I phone home to my answering machine and find twenty messages that are just me (and she breaks into some vocalese). I do a lot of corporate events and that are intended to be straight up jazz but the musicians always take it a little bit, outside what is written. We always come up with these crazy arrangements on the spot. I would like at some point to do a record of not so standard standards."

The flip side of Sillanpaa's writing personality delves into deeper themes and involves a much more structured approach to writing. Songs such as "On The Other Side" surfaced when a friend was grieving over the loss of her father. The songwriter pondered what is on the other side of death and do we get an opportunity to be reunited with our loved ones.



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"I want to thank you, my baby/For your constant faith in me/Through all of life's journeys/ You were always inspiring me/ You hold the key to this heart of mine," Sillanpaa gently coos the words to "Thank You" a spectacular song. Sheldon Sandboer's whispering piano chops accompany her, while Rob Vulic's drums can be heard quietly in the background.

For as much as *Good Life* produced tracks are R&B shaded jazz tunes, the Sillan & Young quartet that she co-founded with guitar virtuoso Aaron Young is more organic and stripped down. She says, "The Good Life music is very mellow and I feel that I have room as a singer to be flexible." The quartet on the other hand has more of an alternative jazz sound that leans toward folk. The ensemble also features extraordinary pianist Sheldon Zandboer whose every chop you want to drool over. Bassist Kodi Hutchinson and drummer Tyler Hornby complete the quartet. The group is in the midst of its second major recording.

Sillanpaa says, "I have really found a home with this particular quartet. We try to work together as much as we can. They are there for the music and you can feel it. What brings the best out of me is I know that the musicians onstage with me love the music as much as me." The singer feels she has found that with the quartet.

As jazz takes root in this western Canadian city, Sillan & Young have become buzzwords in the music community. When an artist's career is still in its infancy, the musician/singer usually invites all their friends and distant cousins to their concerts to keep from performing before empty chairs. Sillanpaa has now reached the point where her concerts are regularly sold out. Laughing she says, "Usually you know at least half of the (people in the) room and they are your friends. You see them (the people she does not know) singing along to your lyrics and that's kind of tripping."

In some ways it seems very distant from the time she was competing in talent competitions and star searches in Sweden as a ten year old or later as a professional performer aboard European cruise ships between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. "I did everything from Janis Joplin to Aretha Franklin. I was very fortunate to start at such a young age," she says.

By the age of 16, Johanna had been presented with two different recording deals in Sweden as well as in France.

When Sillanpaa was eighteen her family moved to Edmonton, a city located in northern Canada. Eventually she enrolled in the music program at Grant MacEwan College. Much to her chagrin at that time, it appeared her only opportunities to sing were going to come through country music, as the jazz scene in the city of Edmonton was non-existent. She is also quick to point out that the musical landscape in Alberta has changed significantly over the past decade. The red-hot Alberta economy has led to a simultaneous population explosion and the arts community has been one of the beneficiaries.

Sillanpaa's first big break came with the jazz and funk octet Yomozo. "We started off doing covers and eventually did a CD. We wanted to have high energy and something very different. It was an amazing project that opened up a lot of doors for (jazz) in Calgary. There was a point where we were working five house gigs per week," says the singer.

After three years, the members of Yomozo went their separate ways and the singer/songwriter considered moving to eastern Canada known for its big jazz venues and festivals in Montreal and Toronto. She decided to stay in Calgary however and it was there that she hooked up with Aaron Young who had just returned from an almost continuous five years stint touring Europe.

As Sillanpaa and the quartet Sillan & Young continue to color outside the lines, the young artist is currying favor with critics in France, Germany and the UK. She has also performed with jazz and R&B acts throughout the United States.

Among her, many aspirations she says, "At some point I would like to go back to Scandinavia with my music because I also know I have a very non Swedish influence in my style now. I would really like to take my music back and to see if it goes over well there."

www.johannamusic.com

[Back]

Friday, 09 February 2007

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