

## Interview

# Shirley Crabbe

By Joe Patitucci

**Jazz Inside:** Talk about your new recording and how the creation might have challenged or stretched you.

**Shirley Crabbe:** My desire was to create an album that inspires a sense of well-being, warmth, joy and beauty. Comfort food for the ears. An album that people can listen to, with glass of wine in hand, and enjoy. I didn't want *Home* to be a regular "Standards" album, so each song was chosen based on the fact that it was either a rarely performed gem from the Great American Songbook or it had never been interpreted in the jazz idiom. I also had to completely love singing it. It took about a year to reach the final list of songs and arrangements that are presented on the album. The recording date for *Home* was like a dream - a more perfect 2 days there will never be. I felt very supported by my musicians and by my team. The rehearsals and recording sessions were so natural and the musicians were incredibly generous. So there was no challenge there. I felt most challenged in my role as the Executive Producer. I loved being responsible for everything from catering to paychecks and it was definitely a pleasure being in the company of such experienced and highly talented professionals. But staying clearheaded, focused,

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in control and creative while trying to oversee every aspect of your very first recording took a lot of prayer and an open heart — and ear — to advice and encouragement.

**JJ:** Could you talk about the process of healing and reconnecting with your talents as a vocalist following the operation on your vocal cords?

**SC:** Because I relied so much on that "voice" to define myself, not being able to sing was devastating. I learned so much during that time of silence. I learned that its not what you sound like that makes you a singer, its who you are and what you have to say. It was an intense character building experience. In 2005 I was one of a small number of singers that year to undergo KTP Laser surgery to repair my damaged vocal cords. After the surgery, and about 3 weeks of "paper and pencil" silence. I opened my mouth to sing again and what came out was truly a miracle from God. My voice had been completely restored. It wasn't hard at all to reconnect to my voice because although I had stopped singing out loud I had never stopped singing in

my heart. I did however start taking voice lessons again so that I could relearn and strengthen my technique. I also decided to make the most of my "second chance." And as they say ... "the rest is history."

**JJ:** Tell us about some of the noteworthy discussions that you may have had with the artists performing on your new recording that made a significant impact on you. You recorded with Houston Person, Dave Glasser, and others.

**SC:** Every discussion with Houston Person is noteworthy! If you want to get the truth... you get it from Houston. You better listen carefully, because the last thing he says to you before he hangs up the phone is usually the most important thing. I recall one conversation ending with the lines "Be more aggressive!" - an important piece of advice for anyone trying to break into a tough market like New York City. Houston is a motivating force! I also had many great discussions with Donald Vega who gave me tons of practical advice on how to work with the musicians and how to prepare for the rehearsals and recording sessions as well as wise words about keeping your head and heart in the right place.

**JJ:** You have an attraction for compositions from the Great American Songbook that are less frequently performed, and are wonderfully lyrical. Could you talk about some of those songs and some of what the allure is?

**SC:** Attraction is the perfect word to use here! I love songs that have a rich harmonic structure and an interesting and sometimes complex melody. That's what attracted me to "You Taught

My Heart To Sing". The melodic line and range can be challenging at times. The song's beautiful harmonies have a certain amount of "lushness" which makes it delectable to me. In addition, the lyrics tell a story that's worth telling again and again. Roland Hanna's song "Seasons" is built on an unpretentious melody and again, a beautiful harmonic structure. Yet the poetry is so intriguing. In general, I am attracted to songs that are unique and excellently crafted. When I look for new material to sing I like to go to the Great American Songbook because these composers have time and time again proven themselves to be solid songwriters.

**JJ:** Could you discuss several of your vocal influences and the wisdom you have discovered among those that you try to embody in your own creative pursuits?

**SC:** I am simply in love with Ella Fitzgerald and Ethel Waters. They have been a strong influence on my singing style, interpretation, and overall



approach to singing. I have spent a lot of time studying their recordings and learning about their life struggles and joys. From Ella ... she always puts her all into every performance ... always in tune, she sang with vigor, and with a joy that came straight from her heart. Ethel Waters ... always seems completely invested in her music and the story no matter how simple the song. She colors the notes and fills each word with that story. Each song is like a little vignette. Kurt Elling ... great storyteller and singer. The most important lesson that I have learned from these great singers is: that true originality comes from just being true to yourself.

**JJ:** Talk about the importance of learning melodies and maintaining the integrity of the original composer's intent as you interpret a song.

**SC:** Ella always sang the melody. I was taught that lesson by my first mentors Harold Mabern, and the late Jamil Nasser. They instructed me to be like Ella - know what the song is really about, sing the lyric and melody first, and take all of the above into consideration when you are thinking about new ways to interpret it. For me, part of learning a new song includes: finding out where it came from - Was it written for a movie, the radio, or musical theater, etc.? Has anything been published about this song? Who speaks these lines, why are they saying it, who are they saying it to? Only after I have learned everything there is to know about that song can I then begin to make it my own.

**JJ:** What is it about your music that you've discovered connects the audience with you? What do you do, if or when, you experience some disconnect between you and the listeners?

**SC:** I feel most connected to my audience when we are in that "zone" Which I define as: a deep level of concentration where your all of your senses are heightened, you are vulnerable, spontaneous, yet controlled. You are pouring out your soul, and the audience is in that zone with you. It's a wonderful connection. It's that pouring out of the soul that's fun for me. Oh course, I never disconnect from my listeners!

Visit: [www.ShirleyCrabbe.com](http://www.ShirleyCrabbe.com)

