



“Y

et by the end [of a Natalie Douglas show], you simply want her to carry on into the small hours,” music critic Clive Davis once wrote in *The Times* (UK). One of Natalie’s most ardent supporters, Davis is not alone. Her unique blend of jazz, soul, and blues attracts a new generation of fans, while keeping her devoted followers returning to hear familiar favorites and new material alike.

Some two decades after leaving Los Angeles to take a job at Brandy’s piano bar on NYC’s Upper East Side, Natalie’s career is the stuff of every cabaret singer’s dreams.

Her magnificent third release, *Human Heart*, won both the 2017 MAC Award (Major Recording) and a Bistro Award (Recording), and the New York critics touted her album release show at Birdland as one of her best-ever performances.

Over ten years elapsed between *To Nina: Live at Birdland* (2005) and *Human Heart* (2016): "I hadn't planned to take such a long break between the second and third CDs, but life and live performance took precedence for quite a while! On the upside, I had tons of material ready for the studio. We have an entirely new album in the can almost ready to go, so record number four will drop as soon as we can all be in the same town to finish it, maybe early next year."

If you've only heard Natalie perform live (particularly shows which rock out with electric guitar,

This page
(from top)

Natalie Douglas with
Julie Wilson

(L-R) Aisha de Haas,
Adriane Lenox
Ben Vereen

(L-R) Andrea Marcovici,
Stacy Sullivan,
Elizabeth Sullivan, KT Sullivan
Christina Bianco, Brian Nash

(L-R) Christine Pedi, Anita Gillette,
Tonya Pinkins

Carol Woods

Opposite page
(from top)

Natalie with

Dawn Hampton

(L-R) Jim Caruso, Julie Halston
Klea Blackhurst

Billy Stritch

Gabrielle Stravelli

(L-R) Michael Feinstein,
Tom Wopat Mark Hartman

Angela Bassett

Marilyn Maye

Erich Bergen



bass, and heavy percussion), the album may come as something of a surprise. While the material ranges from jazz to musical theater classics, like "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" from *Show Boat* or "It Never Was You" (from the Kurt Weill/Maxwell Anderson score to *Knickerbocker Holiday*), *Human Heart* is unquestionably a jazz album, which "grew organically" from songs frequently requested over the years. "By the time we went into the studio," she admits, "I had a list of songs a mile long!"

Natalie's husband, Billy Joe Young, asked why they "couldn't get all the musicians into the studio on the same day and do it live with [her] singing in the

booth, like an old-school, classic recording." They'd attempted this with new material, but this time they "laid down songs they'd been playing a while, songs

[they'd] lived in." This may account for the album's settled and polished feel—from the lyrical opening track, "Wholly Earth," to the final track, "Human Heart," a tentatively hopeful (and also keyboard-heavy)

ballad by Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens from the musical *Once on This Island*.

Whether she's luxuriating over the trials of love, or singing political songs, like the devastating Abe Meeropol classic

"Strange Fruit" or Nina Simone's up-tempo "Mississippi Goddam," Natalie's voice seems to expand into each syllable, inhabiting the ideas behind the lyrics. "Find[ing] out what a song really means to you after you've known each other awhile" is, in her words, "a particularly joyous thing."

Along with the CD release party in the spring of 2016, Natalie debuted two new shows at Birdland in the fall: *Stevie Songs: The Music of Stevie Nicks and Stevie Wonder* (her 50th appearance at the legendary jazz club) and, one month later, the third installment of *Freedom Songs*. Natalie wrapped up a whirlwind year with her annual New Year's Eve show at The Duplex, her 18th year-end performance in the Village club so dear to her.

With her boundless energy and sweet nature, Natalie makes everything look easy. But it's no small feat to transform cabaret from an avocation to a vocation. "Unfortunately, cabaret isn't really a money-making proposition," she laments. Extraordinary vocal talent and the capacity to connect personally with an audience are, of course, crucial, but making a "bridge" from a popular or even award-winning show at Don't Tell Mama or the Metropolitan Room to steady high-profile gigs requires both business sense and smarts. "It's a full-time job,"

she concedes. "My husband sometimes jokes it's time for me to hire a manager." If anyone in the cabaret world is up to that job, it's Natalie, who graduated from Westlake School for Girls, a prestigious prep school near UCLA, at 16, and then from USC (Phi Beta Kappa, no less) at 19 with a degree in psychology and certificates in theater and Women's Studies. A pre-med student at UC Riverside before transferring to USC, she was studying organic chemistry—a subject that even successful doctors recall with dread—at the tender age of 17.

Natalie completed her formal education with a Masters in psychology from UCLA. With two degrees by 21 and a powerhouse intellect encouraged by her parents (professionals with advanced training in engineering and psychology), she might have pursued any number of careers. But, by 25, the singer told *Cabaret Scenes'* Peter Haas in his illuminating 2003 feature, that she would be miserable if she "didn't lead a creative life."

Like many singers, Natalie performs regularly on cruises, though not as an employee of a cruise line. She works for Atlantis Events, which allows her to work a week or ten-day trip, but remain available for other gigs and projects, including her annual summer



Jean Ramirez



Bill Weintraub



Ryan Wiley

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Natalie Douglas

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youth intensive in Michigan with longtime collaborator, co-teacher, and music director Brian Nash. "Little ones make perfect adjustments," she says, "You tell them to fix this or that, a dropped line or a wrong note,

Find[ing] out what a song really means to you after you've known each other a while—a particularly joyous thing.

and they just do it, unselfconsciously. They're not even aware they should be scared."

One challenge for cabaret singers trying to make a living in the business is the shift in musical tastes since the reign of the Great American Songbook. "Marilyn Maye," Natalie points out, "talks about this." Maye, Natalie continues, says, "You could be doing a show for three straight weeks at a single room. So you'd be at the Persian Room in New York one month, then the Drake in Chicago the next. Then you'd go be in a musical somewhere. And the same people who saw you doing musical theater would go see you performing solo." There was, in short, a natural flow and overlap between the musical theater and night club stage.

The self-described musical geek goes on, "Before *The Book of Mormon*, *Hamilton*, and *If/Then* charted, the only Broadway musical cast recording to make the *Billboard* Top 20 since *Hair* [which claimed the top spot in

1969] was *Dreamgirls* in 1982!" With the success of *Dear Evan Hansen*, two cast albums occupy spots in the Top 20 for the first time in over 50 years, when *Hello, Dolly!* and *Fiddler on the Roof* held that distinction for nearly three months.

Natalie credits her years in piano bars with teaching her how to read a room and learn how to turn "each individual party into one big party of which everyone is a part." But sometimes, the music is just background for customers who want to drink and chat and a performer needs to roll with it.

Another turning point in Natalie's ascendancy is, of course, her collaboration with Jim Caruso, who brought *Cast Party* to Birdland, and then created the *Broadway at Birdland* series at the iconic jazz club. The history of *Cast Party* merits an article, if not a book-length study, of its own. When it began at the King Kong Room in 2003, "there wasn't a lot happening in the city on

Monday nights." Caruso invited singers to perform, but it was all quite informal. When that venue closed suddenly with nearly no notice, Caruso scrambled to find other venues. Every show booked got a new slot, whether at the Laurie Beechman, The Triad, or Ars Nova. "We

laughingly referred to it as our 'Midtown Tour,'" she recalls. In the early days, one might hear Amanda Green, Billy Porter, Natalie's longtime friend and music director

Mark Hartman, Dave Koz, Max von Essen, and BJ Crosby on any given night.

Creating, performing, and promoting



music would be all-consuming for some. But for Natalie, who grew up in a political family, not being political was never an option: "My mother took me with her to vote when I was very little. I loved it. I don't remember her saying explicitly that voting was an obligation, but it was both solemn and fun to go to the ballot box."

The performer has always been vocal on social media, but for her, as for so many others, the 2016 election changed everything. "I was pretty much in a coma the first 24 hours," she admits. "And not because I've never supported a candidate who lost," she hastens to add. Her take on the election: "You know, a Facebook memory popped up from the GOP primary race in 2012. A campaign is like a job interview, [albeit] one that takes far too long. You can't just say, 'Trust me, I got this.' That's not good enough. Even if you don't have the perfect answer or say what I want to hear, you have to tell me something. This year, it was like 'Okay, you don't have to tell us anything. Just don't be black. Don't be a woman.'" And, like so many stunned and dismayed by the results of the election, Natalie marveled that voters regarded nothing as "a deal-breaker" where President Trump was concerned.

After the initial shock passed, she began to re-tweet Joy Reid, Charles Blow, and other prominent figures of their ilk. Twitter became an online community cum support group: "Hey, did you see this?" one would tweet another. Pre-Trump, Natalie believes, politics was largely compartmentalized for American voters (on both sides of the spectrum); it was something they paid attention to only ever four years. But that's wrong, in her view. "Politics," she muses philosophically, "is simply the name we give to how people get along, the relationships we must form to live together in a society. In a village of 12, we could fight it out. But there are too many people in America to do that. So we have politics instead." Politics, in her view, was

not always a matter of "identity." Democrats had one notion of "how to get things done," while Republicans had another. But both sides wanted to get things done. She blames the Reagan Revolution, in part, for the toxic level of obstruction that prevents compromise.

America may be disintegrating, but Natalie's career is only getting stronger. Following James Baldwin, she sees the artist as a "sort of emotional or spiritual historian, [whose] role is to make you realize the doom and glory of knowing who you are and what you are... and to tell what it's like to be alive." This, as much as

anything, describes the experience of a Natalie Douglas show. If just for an hour or so, one feels fully alive.

"There's a special kind of magic when we make a soul to soul connection [in live performance]. With it, I think we can change the world," the performer opines. At the end of each performance, she makes a point of thanking the audience for choosing to spend the evening with her,

amidst the seemingly endless entertainment options on any given New York evening. It's not a throwaway line; Natalie really means it. Ultimately, it's her palpable "human heart," combined with singular vocal prowess,

that sets Natalie Douglas apart. ○

Editor's Note

Upcoming gigs: California: Martini's Above Fourth in San Diego 7/20; Jazz on the Plaza, Los Gatos, 7/26. NYC: Birdland 7/31; 8/28 visit: www.natoliedouglas.com



Above
Natalie and
husband Billy Joe
Young, Jr.

One more time...

**Opposite page
(from top)**
Natalie with
Jim Caruso
Brian Nash (R)
Jane Monheit