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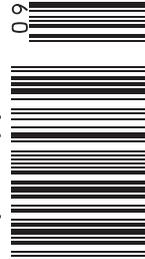
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Lyn Stanley

The Hands-On Chanteuse

Andrew Quint

In the middle of Saturday afternoon at AXPONA 2016 in Chicago, I witnessed what is surely the most demanding test of an audio system there can be—an A/B showdown with The Real Thing. A crowd of around 50 gathered in front of a pricey system in the Legacy loudspeaker room—several systems, actually—to listen to the playback of recordings featuring a sultry-voiced alto singing popular songs from the mid-20th century, supported on disc by elegantly idiomatic small group jazz arrangements. What made the demonstration unusual was that the artist in question, Lyn Stanley, was standing between the speakers, occasionally singing along with her recorded self. Talk about “the absolute sound” as a benchmark: You can run but you can’t hide.

Stanley has become a fixture at audio shows, in the U.S. and abroad, and has done this kind of demonstration many times. Always a striking presence—she’s a professional ballroom dancer as well as a chanteuse and looks the part, which tends to make her stand out in a crowd of sartorially-challenged audiophiles—Stanley cogently explains to her rapt audience what they should be listening for, musically and sonically. Over the past several years, Stanley has recorded and released three exceptional albums, *Lost in Romance* (2013), *Potions [from the 50s]* (2014), and *Interludes* (2015). All three are available as hybrid stereo SACDs, on vinyl, and most recently as high-resolution downloads from Stanley’s new website, simplythebestdownloads.com. The next two planned projects are

a collection of ballads that will honor tenor saxophone great Stanley Turrentine and a big band album that focuses on dance music associated with Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, and Gene Kelly.

Just as notable as the musical and sonic merits of Stanley’s work is her take-charge approach to the creative process that eventuates in a recording. She takes responsibility for every aspect of that process, including hiring the best collaborating musicians and recording professionals—people like recording/mixing engineer Al Schmitt and mastering guru Bernie Grundman. With *Interludes*, Stanley has also taken on the role of producer, and it’s no mere honorific in this instance.

In person, Lyn Stanley is affable and articulate. To allow the singer to fully expand on her ideas regarding recorded performance and sound, I submitted to her some written queries that she addressed over several weeks; her responses are excerpted here.

You have a large fan base among audiophiles here and overseas, and get to a lot of audio shows. Is it very different interacting with this constituency, as opposed to more typical jazz hounds?

Oh, yes, I find them very different. Some “jazzbos” do not view my music as jazz. This may be the reason why jazz sales represent only 1% of *Billboard* reported sales for music. Gatekeeping like this decreases sales and new artist recognition. Jazz should be the most relaxed and open of all the genres, but it’s not always the case. My work reflects a type of old-school jazz that brings wonderful chord treatments to arrangements built around my voice, rhythms, and delivery. I use the best possible musicians from New York City and Los Angeles—known as jazz players—that I can afford and are available when I record.

For the most part, the audiophile community is very open to all kinds of music. They appreciate music in general. That’s a point of differentiation between jazz and audio fanatics. There are some who are stuck on classical, rock, or another genre and will not deviate from that love but, in my experience, audiophiles have a wide range of music in their collections.

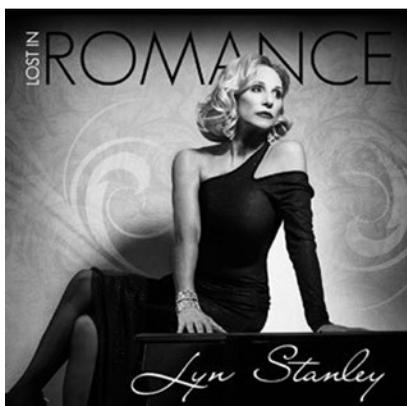
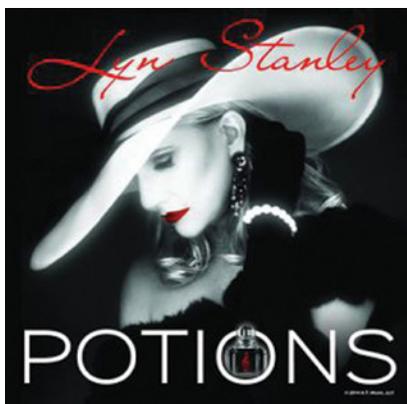
You call Bernie Grundman your “audiophile mentor.” In fact, he’s the dedicatee of your latest album.

I met Bernie for the first time when I was mastering my debut album, *Lost In Romance*. My recording engineer for the album, Tommy Vacari, recommended him to me when I asked who was the best in Los Angeles. I also asked Al Schmitt, who was the mixing engineer, and he too said Bernie was one of the best mastering engineers available.

So, off I went to the mastering session with my producer, and Bernie put the album on to hear it for the first time. Bernie loves jazz and really liked the album—and said so as he listened. He then asked me if I might want it to be put into the vinyl format and not just released as a CD. I had no idea about vinyl’s resurrection because it was not the “go-to” format that is happening today. Bernie said to me, “If they like Diana Krall, they will like you too.” Then he took me back to his lathing room where the lacquers are created so I could see the set-up and take a look at a Krall LP and how her licensor packaged it. I was all ears.

I told Bernie, “If you take over this and check everything and tell me what to do, I will try to find the money to create vinyl for this album.” He agreed. And, from that point on, he took an interest in my work and guided me every step of the way from what weight to use for the vinyl (he likes 180g) to the 45rpm format I use exclusively. He also suggested I press the *Lost In Romance* vinyl at Pallas in Germany. He agreed to check the test pressings and, to this day, he still does that for me. I think he likes that I take an interest in the technical things involved with my products. Today, whenever I have a session with him, or pick up finished materials, he takes time (when he can) to teach me. We’ve become great friends, and I cannot tell you how much his friendship means to me.

What was different, with *Interludes*, with your taking on the role of producer? You’ve always been very hands-on with the production of your albums. It must be very difficult at a session to wear two hats. What duties



get assigned to “associate producers” in the recording studio?

The challenges with producing your own album are the decisions you make that affect the outcome, for better or worse. Most experts tell you to never produce your own work. There is an innate conflict of interest and you can lose perspective and focus due to your ego, plus there are no checks and balances. I can miss a typo when reviewing the copy. I must decide on the proper song order (this is extremely tough and one of the most sensitive decisions a producer can

make), the song selections are critical, the musicians hired are another critical move, the choice of studios, engineers, the mixing—the list is extensive.

I had an experience on *Potions* [from the 50’s] whereby I had to release my first producer due to a conflict of interest. I had to take over myself and finally hired Kenny Werner to help me finish the project since he was one of the pianists and was willing to do it. So, for *Interludes*, I decided to hire associate producers. Two were engineers (Steve Genewick and Paul Tavenner), and the third was one of my arrangers, Steve Rawlins. Genewick was the studio engineer assistant to Al Schmitt for nine tracks and he was the engineer for four tracks. Paul Tavenner helped in the early stages of picking songs and creating arrangements, and with my vocals. Rawlins was involved with song selections, monitoring keys for the songs, conducting one of the sessions, and was a third eye to help with some of the tedious tasks like getting the charts ready for the band tracking sessions.

The Great American Songbook is quite large. How do you decide on repertoire—what to put on a new album? Is it entirely you, or do your collaborating musicians, producers, and others bring you recommendations for songs they think would be a good fit for your voice and style?

That is a good question. It’s all of the above. I have received requests from fans to do certain songs because they think it will be a good fit. I also have songs in my head from my youth, songs Paul Smith (Ella Fitzgerald’s arranger and conductor) and his wife taught or suggested to me, ideas from my musicians, or simply songs that resonate with me and fit the album. I have quite an assortment, from jazz standards to pop to ballads or blues, and of course, rock and roll. I do a lot of research before I hit the ground with my song choices because I have to know I can do a good job singing them and that the lyrics are meaningful to me. I do not sing songs per se—I sing lyrics, and that’s much deeper.

Music

What do you want in a backing arrangement? Do you give much in the way of instructions to your arrangers, or do you give them free reign?

Oh, no, I am actively involved with my arrangements. I can hear in my head what instrumentation I am thinking about and how the feel of the song should be before I assign arrangement work. I work very closely with arrangers, and they will ask me what I am looking to achieve. Sammy Nestico (Count Basie's big band arranger) and Paul Smith told me that if a singer knows what he/she is looking for in an arrangement, their work is easy. So, now, I always review my arrangements, and we make adjustments before I sign off. If I am paying the bill, I get to have the final say. That's the good thing about being an independent artist.

The production credits for *Interludes* seem to imply that the vocals were recorded separately from the

instrumental tracks—with engineers other than Al Schmitt. Although this is frequently the way pop albums are made, do you think this is ideal? Is there something lost without the real-time collaboration that can make a performance more than the sum of its parts?

Interludes does have a couple of vocal "scratch tracks" recorded during the original musician tracking sessions ("Whole Lotta Love," "I'm A Fool To Want You"). A singer usually records a scratch track while the musicians are laying down their music. Hearing the singer helps them figure out their timing. Many times these scratch tracks are discarded and replaced with vocals that are recorded separately. Why? It gives the engineer time to keep focused on the musicians and watch the mics to make sure they are working and have not been accidentally moved, and the tape machine is working properly—or for other reasons. The musicians are a very

expensive part of recording sessions. Recording vocals later puts less pressure on the vocalist and the recording crew and makes the musician tracking session go faster. Imagine: the musicians record the perfect track but the vocalist suddenly gets a frog throat on a vocal line, or you got distracted and sang the wrong lyrics or in the wrong place. Result? Everyone has to do it over again. The first time is usually the best track, sometimes the second round, but everyone gets worn out after the third attempt.

Why vinyl? Do you feel it's necessarily superior, sonically, to what you offer the consumer on an SACD or high-resolution download, or is it more a question of "giving the customer what he wants?"

Vinyl was not in my original game plan, but when Bernie Grundman suggested I use this format, I was all ears. Today, with my exposure to the finest audio equipment in the world, I have an opportunity that



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many listeners do not have—to hear differences. I can tell you from personal experience, listening to the same cut from the same album in the form of CD, SACD, vinyl, and tape is eye (and ear) opening. The thing about my work is that it's so well recorded, even the MP3s sound really good. But, exceptional sound will come from the alternate formats—vinyl, SACD, high-resolution downloads, and tape.

There's more to it than just giving customers options. If your hobby is audio equipment, you want to hear music in formats that suit your equipment preferences. If a fan is a vinyl collector, he/she may not care about SACDs. Some of my fans that collect downloads will buy my album in 5.6 DSD format as well as 2.8 to see if there is really a difference on their system. They may decide to add a new cable, a higher quality tube, or some other modification to hear a difference. This is the nature of the hobby.

Personally, out of all audiophile formats, I prefer my music on reel-to-reel tape—providing there is an exceptional player and system to back it up. But I strongly believe reel-to-reel tape has to be from an analog original mixed and mastered source. Tapes made from digital recordings are wasteful purchases in my book. If an album is recorded digitally, it will be mastered digitally. So, all you have is a digital album on tape. My album *Lost In Romance* was digitally recorded and I will never release it on tape. I'm a diehard and stickler on this point. The source is the truth.

Would you call yourself an audiophile? What does the term mean to you?

I enjoy fine music. Does that make me an audiophile? I venture to say there are levels to the term. I like technical things, and enjoy knowing about the mechanics of recording and the physics of sound. Plus the chills it gives me when I hear something that moves me emotionally listening to well-recorded music through a great system. I'm not an engineer, but I am a bit of a nerd and am fascinated by this area of music delivery and production.

My stepfather, a Ph.D. engineer, was a true audiophile and bought the best he could afford. We had top-of-the-line products around the house, including a really complicated Pioneer receiver—I thought I'd get a college degree just figuring out how to use it at the age of 14. So, as a teenager, I was exposed to incredible home systems and lots of great music, as our household would spin vinyl records, mostly artists familiar to my parents.

Unfortunately, my mother *gave away* my stepfather's system that I was hoping to inherit. I was living in another state at the time and never thought she'd take that action because she loved music too. "Never assume with your parents" is the lesson! I know good equipment and what I like. If I stop spending money on making music, I might have a little left to buy an incredible system of my own. Maybe then I will gain the title of a true audiophile. **tas**

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