

(features)



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COVER STORY by JFK Miller

harry connick jr.

the man with the golden voice

In a typical New Orleans drawl, Harry Connick, Jr. describes his 20-year career as a "great ryyde". In fact, the ride covers almost 35 years if you consider Connick, Jr. played his first concert at six and was recording music with a local jazz band at 10. He's had a staggering career, if only by the numbers: album sales of more than 25 million, 20 film appearances, three Grammys, one Emmy. Throw in a Golden Globe and Oscar nomination, and some philanthropic work as the founder of the New Orleans' Musicians' Village – a community of homes for displaced musicians from Hurricane Katrina – and you find yourself agreeing with the "great ride" description. Yet despite his impressive CV, many journalists, including this one, can't resist referring to him as the "new Sinatra", the label Connick, Jr. earned early on in his career. Don't blame us. After all, Connick, Jr. made his name belting out the Ol' Blue Eyes' standard "It Had to Be You" on the 1989 soundtrack to *When Harry Met Sally*. There are other similarities too. Like Sinatra, Connick, Jr. is a big band crooner who enjoys a successful parallel career in films. Like Sinatra, he's starred opposite some of the most popular leading ladies of his day: Hillary Swank, Jodie Foster, Jennifer Aniston, and (soon) Renee Zellweger. But there the comparison ends. No hard-living rat pack for this father of three daughters, who's been happily married for 13 years (to former Victoria's Secret model Jill Goodacre) and who claims to be well acquainted with his "feminine side". In short, he's as wholesome as a Louisiana gumbo. That said, Connick, Jr. has shown a willingness to go against type in his film choices. Last year, he played a frightening thug in director William Friedkin's *Bug*, and some years ago he shocked audiences in the role of a serial killer in *Copycat*. Now, on the verge of his return Shanghai gig (he played here in 1995) with his 14-member band, Connick, Jr. talks to us about his strange film choices, the song-writing process and his beloved New Orleans.

that's: You've been in the game now for 20 years, and you still get this Sinatra shtick. Do you ever get tired of the comparison?

Harry Connick, Jr. (HCJ): Well, I mean, I don't hear it that much any more. I heard it a lot when I started out, and it was flattering, you know, and, to be honest with you, it got a little bit old after a while. Obviously he was an influence, but I think when you reach a certain age you start to develop your own style.

that's: You once said that when you reached 30 you stopped listening to Sinatra. Who do you follow religiously in music these days?

HCJ: When I said that, I stopped listening to everything. Sitting around listening to music doesn't give me much pleasure. You know, I spent my whole life analyzing it and studying it and philosophizing about it, and now, to be honest with you, all I think about is my own stuff. So I don't follow anybody religiously, you know, I just kinda do my own thing.

that's: When was the last time you bought a CD or downloaded some music?

HCJ: At least 10 years.

that's: What's your desert island CD?

HCJ: One to explain how to make a boat to get off that island.

that's: Tell us about the song-writing process. Do you have a tune buzzing around in your head and start tinkering on the keyboard?

HCJ: Not really. I usually write the lyrics first, I don't really use the piano much when I write. I pretty much know how it's gonna sound, and then you kinda... there's only 12 notes, you know what I mean? You just pick which ones you think sound the best. I usually write the lyrics first, and then write the melody afterwards, and then the ar-

connick, jr.



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rangement and any kind of orchestration follow that.

that's: You said once your singing voice was 10 years behind your piano playing. How's your voice now?

HCJ: I think it's caught up. It's a physical thing, you know. When I was 20 I didn't have nearly the command of my voice that I have now. As a piano player I did. Physically, I've caught up... there's nothin' I want to sing now that I can't really sing.

that's: You've made about 20 films, you've done TV with *Will & Grace*, you've been on Broadway with *The Pajama Game*, you compose and perform your own songs. Most celebrities are happy doing the one thing. Obviously diversity is important for you.

HCJ: It's not being diverse that's important; it's being an artist. I just do things I like to do, and among the things I like to do are the things you mentioned. And, you know, I've enjoyed my life thus far doin' just that.

that's: For a performer who many consider wholesome music-wise, you've chosen some incredibly dark characters to play in films. What attracts you to these roles?

HCJ: Well, what attracted me to the role in *Bug* was working with William Friedkin. I'm a big fan of his, and I just wanted to be in his presence and kinda see how he worked. With *Copycat* I just thought it was an interesting role to play. I basically just like having a good time, you know, I get real bored and I have a pretty short atten-

tion span.

that's: What's been the most fun movie set to work on?

HCJ: They're always fun in different ways. I think about doin' *Copycat*... that was a lotta fun, you know, only because the character was so far removed from me. I'm doin' a movie now with Renee Zellweger [*Chilled in Miami*, to be released in 2009] that's turning out to be a lot of fun. I think it depends on the people you work with. I look back over the list of people I've worked with from Hillary Swank... er, to whoever it is. These are just extraordinarily talented people, and it's just been a great ride.

that's: Speaking of which, who's your



performer to basically be on set for two or three months... it's a different head space. So you have to kinda say, 'Look, this isn't live, this is a whole different...' you have to kinda shift gears, you know.

that's: You've given a lot back to the community in New Orleans since the disaster, including the Musicians' Village Project. Did it hurt you that some people accused you of selling out with the commercial you did for Ford Lincoln? [The commercial shows Connick, Jr. driving around New Orleans assessing the devastation.]

HCJ: I don't know... who? I've heard of some people bein' upset. I don't know if they were New Orleanians or not. No, not at all. I mean the whole point of that commercial was to... well, there were two points... one, and this is probably the most important reason, we wouldn't do that commercial unless Lincoln featured the Musicians' Village in it, that's a very, very dear project to my heart. And we basically said, 'Look, we appreciate the offer but you have to incorporate my town and my project,' and they agreed to do it. Also, I don't know what 'selling out' is, but that's how I make my living. So... and you know, yeah... I did get paid, you know, for a commercial. But far greater than any benefit I had personally was the attention that it gave to the Musicians' Village. And I have no problem goin' to sleep at night; I don't think I did anything wrong.

that's: The criticism was that you and Ford were making a dollar on the back of the disaster...

HCJ: I think maybe for a fleeting moment I played devil's advocate and tried to justify that side of it, and it was futile only because it's ridiculous. I don't have any reason to defend myself or what I've done. I'm very proud the commercial shed light on New Orleans, and gave a lot of people in New Orleans some extra money. No, I think it's a great thing.

that's: You live in Connecticut now. How important is New Orleans to you?

HCJ: It's real important. I try to get back at least once every two months. My dad and all his side of the family live there. So obviously I go back to visit them, but my interests are elsewhere as well, you know, with regards to the Musicians' Village and, you know, kinda keeping in touch with what's goin' on down there. The city is very very important to me... so I try to get down as much as I can.

that's: What are you expecting at your upcoming Shanghai gig? Do you think the crowd will be expatriates or local Chinese?

HCJ: I don't know, man. I don't know how many people know who I am over there. The more Chinese people I can reach the better. Sometimes when I'm playing overseas it's a lot of Americans, and sometimes it's not. So... but... I'd like to play for some locals, you know.

that's: Thanks for talking to us.

HCJ: Thank you man, nice talkin' to you. ■

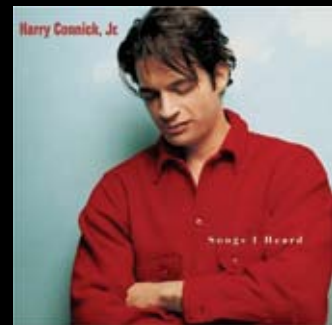
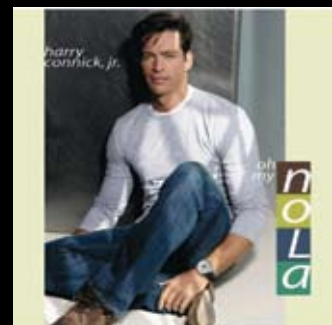
favorite leading lady? You've played opposite Hillary Swank, Sandra Bullock, Jodie Foster, Ashley Judd, Debra Messing, Jennifer Aniston...

HCJ: Well, you know it would be unfair to pick one; they're all so diverse and talented. I can say I have a great relationship with Hillary. We really kind of hit it off, you know, clicked very well; she's a terrific person, and I really admire her, you know, she's a great talent. I love all of them to be honest with you. They're all great girls.

that's: How does being on a movie set compare with live performing?

HCJ: Well, I'm a performer, you know, a live performer... so there are many sacrifices you have to make on a movie set. For a live

selected discography



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