

Interview

Chris McNulty

Vocalist

Interview by Eric Nemeyer

Hear Chris McNulty at 54 Below, NY
June 16th, CD Release Event
Visit Chris McNulty online at
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JJ: How do you connect personally with songs that you sing?

CM: It's a combination of things. I have to love the melody and the harmony of course but the lyric definitely has to speak to me. I need to be able to live or feel the story, musically and lyrically, otherwise it's hard to put my heart and soul into a song, whether it's through humor, pathos, irony, whatever. I'll never sing a song if I can't find a way to engage an audience/listener

and of course re-shaped the vision, one paying homage to my son. There was a very short window of opportunity when we knew Steve would be in New York so the focus became one of whether we could pull it all together in time and also whether I'd be able to put the vision into action. What we hadn't counted on was Hurricane Sandy hitting right at the start of the proceedings. The power of that storm and its aftermath needs no re-telling here, though it forced me to make a decision on whether to bail or continue. Being without heat, water and electricity for eight days kind of cut into the allotted time we had. I had a decent upright and a fireplace. This was at a crucial juncture of the proceedings. I remember thinking I could either bail and risk the opportunity not coming around again or I could scramble and deal with the added challenges. I'm pretty glad I chose the latter. I had

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or me! If all those things are there I can usually find a way to make a song my own. I also need to have room to breathe new life into a song, whether it's by way of finding a unique treatment or reinventing it through reharmonization. The musicians I've worked closely with have all been great facilitators of that.

JJ: Could you discuss the development of your new recording *Eternal*—from concept to completed project?

CM: The seed was planted back in 2010 when Australian orchestrator-arranger, Steve Newcomb and myself were discussing working collaboratively on a project. Losing my son, Sam brought the project and us a little closer together

candles, a few flashlights and perhaps fifteen books containing plenty of tunes and was stuck out there for several weeks. The battery on my computer was flat and I was missing my charger for the car, so I worked on the floor with music, pen and paper. One flashlight lighting the music and the other on the piano along with a few candles. I spent three or four days and nights going from floor to piano. A week or so later when we were some of the lucky ones to get electricity back on, I was able to create an excel spreadsheet with about 20 tunes, composers, links to original versions, treatment ideas and sonic choices. Steve's a generation younger and I was a little worried he might either hate or perhaps not even know the tunes at the top of my list. I held my breath and pressed send with my first

choice. You can't imagine the elation I felt upon hearing back that this was one of his favorite tunes and one he'd always wanted to arrange. I got my courage up and sent him my next two ideas. His responses were just as positive, if not more so. Those three tunes were "What Are You Doing The Rest Of Your Life," "Where Is Love" and Steve Kuhn's "The Saga of Harrison Crab Feathers." In looking back I feel these tunes set the stage and framed the entire project. It seemed like less than no time we'd scaled the list down to 12. It was more than fortuitous that shortly after that I happened by chance to re-connect with the wonderful John Di Martino who I'd worked with on a previous release. At this stage I still wasn't sure how I was going to come up with the treatments and core arrangements for Steve to write the orchestrations. Initially I thought we'd split the work between the two of us. Soon as I heard John, I knew I'd found the perfect solution. This was going to be a three tiered collaboration. Turned out to be a miraculous collaboration. John and I were able to get together in New York City five or six times to work on creating the core arrangements. It was such a deeply creative time. I can't imagine how this project would have worked without John's genius in the mix. We prepared ten out of the twelve songs for Steve. John created the Sibelius files and sent them off to Steve and the rest is history. Those orchestrations are extraordinary. Steve had literally three weeks with which to write most of orchestrations. In the meantime, I booked the rest of the rhythm section, found the studio, organized a Steinway piano to be delivered. The only studio available that was large enough to accommodate the chamber ensemble and quartet happened to be Water Sound in Hoboken which, believe it or not had been under seven feet of water in late October. Their piano had been ruined, hence the hiring of the Steinway. Steve arrived two weeks before the recording date, in time to rehearse the strings and woodwinds once. We had time for one full rehearsal with chamber ensemble and quartet and a week later—after I returned from short West Coast tour—we recorded the album over two days in January.

JJ: How did you decide on including and arranging Steve Kuhn's "The Saga of Harrison Crab Feathers" on this album?

CM: I was searching through piles of books looking for lyrics and melodies that spoke to me. Tunes I thought would create a cohesive thread, tell a story, paint a picture, speak of love, of loss, of joy, remembrance but most importantly allow me to sing to Sam. The material also had to suit a small chamber group setting. One of the first songs I found was Steve Kuhn's, "The Saga of Harrison Crab Feathers." I'd never seen or heard this song until I found it sitting in the dark, on the floor in the middle of that storm. The opening lyrics jumped off the page, for all the obvious reasons. I remember being quite taken aback. I went to the piano, for some reason not expecting to hear such a beautiful melody. I guess because I'd never heard the tune and couldn't believe I'd have missed knowing about

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By John Abbott

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its beauty. The reason for that I found out later was that the song was accidentally omitted from the index page and that's almost always where I start looking for tunes. A few days later I went back to find Steve's song but it was as if it had disappeared off the face of the planet. I searched high and low, sifting through every book's index to no avail. It felt like I'd lost this song as mysteriously as I'd found it. That perhaps I'd imagined it all. Not ready to give up I decided to go through each book, page by page. Days later I found it. Definitely a bizarre experience with all that drama going on. I think it's fitting that it's the first track on the album.

JJ: Could you talk about your association with orchestrator Steve Newcomb about the music on your new recording *Eternal*?

CM: Steve and I met while I was on tour back in Australia in 2009. An American ex-pat trumpeter, John Hoffman introduced us. Our friendship grew out of playing a few gigs together down there and then meeting up a bunch while Steve was here studying for his doctorate at Manhattan School of Music. He's such a gifted arranger and orchestrator, especially with this size chamber ensemble. It takes a special kind of skill to write for a small section - 4 strings and 4 woodwinds and have it sound so rich and dense. I think the results on *Eternal* speak for themselves. I'm so looking forward to collaborating with Steve on the live tour back down in Australia later this year. That's going to be very special.

JJ: How do you balance your activity and efforts to maintain your proficiency and develop as a

regularly enough or not being as engaged in the informal creative process - interacting with other musicians away from the stage. I've created a bunch of exercises using a methodology that integrates jazz harmony, ear training, theory and improvisation all at the same time. That way vocalists can stay in shape regardless of whether they're working a lot or not. The book should have been published by now but I've been focusing on the *Eternal* release which is all coming to a head June 16th with the CD release event happening at 54 Below in New York City. After that I'll get the audio tracks completed and go to print.

JJ: What experience or recording or performance initially inspired your interest in jazz?

CM: It's only a difficult question to answer because back in the early to late 70's I was out on the road a lot, constantly hanging out with musicians after gigs listening, sharing music. There was such a huge array of music being added to my aural landscape during that time. Things just morphed. I think the fusionistic music of the 70's—Herbie Hancock's *Head Hunters*, *Thrust* and *Manchild*, Chick Corea, Billy Cobham brought me to jazz. At that time I had absolutely zero knowledge of anything that came before.

JJ: How did your development in Australia support and/or challenge your earlier development in jazz and as a musician?

CM: I remember the very first time I heard the real deal—a live jazz quartet. It was in Canberra, Australia and it just happened to be Australian jazz greats Don Burrows, George Golla, and the late Ed Gaston and Allan Turnbull. I remember being completely gob smacked. I had never

ever the same again. I'd had the childhood immersion of Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett and all the great R&B of the 60's but nothing quite prepared me for that next period of my life. A whole new, exciting world opened up for me. I was on a large and fast learning curve. I went from poppy, rocky, funky, soul singer to full fledged jazz singer within 12 months. I've been honing my skills as a jazz musician ever since and I've never stopped. Don't plan to any time soon either.

JJ: Could you discuss some words of wisdom or noteworthy discussions you may have had with one or more of your mentors?

CM: Back in Australia, in the early days of my career so many of my mentors weren't physically present. I never got to meet them in person - know them personally. They were my teachers but they came to me from across the seas by way of vinyl recordings. I'm so glad that I got to tell Carmen McRae that she'd been my teacher for a decade or more before she passed. It happened on one of several occasions I got to hear her live at the Blue Note. This was after I'd made my way to New York City. She chuckled that hearty laugh and said "Well come in here gal, sit down, don't be shy." I loved Carmen. She taught me so much. Upon my arrival in New York City in 1988 I set about pursuing my craft in a more serious but subdued way. Juggling the role of single parenting with two and three day jobs at a time meant I had to go about that pursuit at my own pace. I learned not to have expectations based on what others achieved or how people viewed my progress but I learned so much about this deep music by listening to how those great masters made every note count. I never went up and introduced myself. I'm glad I learned that kind of etiquette. I saw them as majestic—Tommy Flanagan, Hank Jones, Mulgrew Miller, Billy Higgins. To me they just were. I just sat quietly and listened and tried to learn, to take in as much as possible. The decades I've spent here listening to and meeting all those jazz masters has been immeasurable. The opportunities afforded me by way of recording and performing with many of them, I will be forever grateful for. I was a wide-eyed young woman then. Now I'm moving into another phase of my life and many of those who I admired the most have left. What are my lasting impressions? Their music, their majesty, the way they carried themselves professionally, on and off the stage, their humility, their passion, their dedication, their kindness. Their drive to continue to create lasting and powerful music. That speaks to me more than any words. I remember sharing a taxi ride home with none other than the great Roy Eldridge. It was 1985. We'd just performed at the Blue Note together with a bunch of other musicians. After hearing that I'd come all the way from Australia with my then seven-year-old son, whose father was African American, he told me I shouldn't stay in New York City. He was very matter of fact and said I should go home. New York City was too racist a place for us. I sometimes wonder now where things might have ended up if I'd listened to Roy.

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vocalist and musician?

CM: Ha... million dollar question. It's tougher than tough being a jazz vocalist in New York City. I've recently written an educational book—not published yet. I wrote it mainly because I wanted to address a bunch of issues that come up for vocalists regarding getting and staying in shape as musicians. One of the main issues that we're faced with is not getting to work/sing out

heard anything like it in my entire life. It had a profound affect on me. I didn't realize just how much until a few years later. That experience happened at the very beginning of my “on the road” days. It took four or five years later for me to connect the dots. Shortly after I returned to Melbourne I heard Billie Holiday, Nancy Wilson and Cannonball Adderley, Carmen McRae and Sarah Vaughan for the very first time and then a zillion listening sessions followed. Nothing was

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JJ: Talk about some of your experiences and fortuitous associations with other jazz artists that may have made a significant impact on your artistry or life perspectives?

CM: Musically speaking Paul Bollenback helped me enormously. It was a great working relationship. We got a lot done. We helped each other in many different ways. That's the thing. Each and every one of us has something to offer—things we do well, things that come as second nature. Other things don't come so easy, are more of a struggle. When you can see that and get along, it's a great thing. I've loved working with engineer Dave Darlington. He's taught me a lot about how to run a business and find joy in every part of the work. Watching him work is like watching a magician. If you look away for a second you miss ten moves. Working with Steve Newcomb, his artistry and brilliance was a hugely rewarding and unforgettable experience. His work ethic was off the charts. Same goes for John DiMartino. So creative. Performing with my son, the artist, Chap One was the most thrilling of all.

JJ: Given the nature of the niche that jazz is, the current reality of this being a contracting market, the challenges of selling prerecorded music, because of illegal downloading, copyright infringement and so on—what kind of vision do you have for yourself about experiencing some

of your hopes and goals in the next five or even ten years?

CM: Ahhhh....sadly I'm just about at the end of this road. It's become virtually unsustainable. I don't know what to suggest. It's going to take the younger generation to make the shift. I can see a time when it could get fixed but it might not happen for a while. Musicians of my age and older have ridden some serious up and down drafts. I think it's an awfully tough time for jazz musicians of any age making their way, or trying to hang tough after decades in the trenches. The future looks cloudy but I remain the eternal optimist. I believe willfulness, courage, ingenuity and open mindedness will play a big role in turning things around but beyond that I believe in the power of the creative spirit. Long after anger, rage and hate have been eliminated, I believe the power of the creative spirit will prevail. I have to. It's where I come from.

JJ: What are your perspectives on balancing a purity of purpose about creating music that you hear and want to see come to life, with the simultaneous attractor and consideration of trying to connect with and or please your current and potential audiences?

CM: For me they've always gone hand in hand. I come from that last generation where one's apprenticeship was completed on the bandstand. We made our living gigging six and sometimes seven nights a week. The only arena for presenting or listening to music back then was a live one or radio. If you didn't play what the people wanted you didn't work, simple as that. I don't

know about making music that's not accessible. I don't know how I'd carve a niche for a smaller audience than what the mainstream jazz audience currently is. That's small enough. As a composer I don't think I write for any one or type or genre. I just write what I hear. I wish I heard or was motivated to write music that would be the next hit. It's just not my calling, I guess. I try to mold my original music in a way that makes the listener gravitate to it regardless of whether it sounds familiar or not. I come from a lot of influences. I'm really glad I do.

JJ: Are there some understandings about life and human nature that you've discovered or some words of wisdom you'd like to share to inspire others?

CM: I think it's all about building relationships. Making people around you feel good, generating good energy. Whether it feels good for you or good for them, it doesn't much matter. As long as you understand that, you'll be fine. Feeling valid, included, that you matter, feel cared about, is important to each and every person on this planet. When someone feels good they usually tell someone else and that's where the building comes into it. You might not be able to be that for everyone but if you can be that enough then you're sowing seeds of good energy. That works in the business and in the personal. You can't do it 24/7 but if you can consciously make an effort to do it every day, in your work and spontaneously with strangers, I think it makes a difference.

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