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L I S S Y W A L K E R

Biography

Lissy Walker sings jazz, but she brings her own unique spin to the music by adding elements drawn from the worlds of folk, country, and '70s acoustic pop. Walker's burnished vocals and her virtuosic band slip effortlessly between genres to create their own soulfully sweet sound—dreamy and bittersweet, heartfelt and swinging—on her stunning new recording, *Wonderland*.

Her debut album, *Life Is Sweet*, garnered enthusiastic reviews from jazz, folk, and indie music publications, and included some of the Bay Area's and New York's finest musicians, including **John R. Burr** on piano, **Jon Evans** on bass, **Scott Nygaard** on guitar, and **Steven Bernstein** on trumpet, with arrangements that brought together an innovative mix of jazz and folk. The album was played on numerous jazz and eclectic radio stations across the country and abroad, and was one of CD Baby's top folk-jazz albums for several months.

When it was time for a follow-up, Walker and co-producer Evans reassembled the *Life Is Sweet* team, along with some new special guest players, including **Ben Goldberg** on clarinet and **Carla Kihlstedt** on violin. The ensemble went into Berkeley's legendary **Fantasy Studios** on Valentine's Day and cut *Wonderland*, an album that brings Walker's subtle intensity to bear on another collection of gems from the American Songbook, as well as a few modern classics.

The songs on *Wonderland* deal in dreams and illusions, desires fulfilled and unfulfilled, and the power of reflection and intent. Walker's sweet, smoky, purring alto is perfectly suited to these songs of yearning. The focus is on songs from two great songwriting eras: swing tunes from the 20s/early 30s and folk ballads and anthems from the 70s. Walker's rich vocals have a hint of restrained passion that suggest country music, but her phrasing, which dances around and before the beat, is pure jazz. Her interpretations, and the brilliance of the band, blend the two eras together, resulting in a classic, yet contemporary, vibe—a perfect hybrid.

"*Alice in Wonderland* has always fascinated me," Walker says. "I love the themes of curiosity, imagination, riddles, and the frustration of expectations the book conjures. I call the album *Wonderland* because of where these songs live: a place of desire, the place we start from on our personal journey. Love opens doors and invites us to give our best, but there's always uncertainty when we love."

Wonderland opens with a starry-eyed medley of “**Dream a Little Dream of Me/I’ll See You in My Dreams.**” The free, slightly asymmetrical playing of pianist **John R. Burr**, bassist **Jon Evans**, and clarinetist **Ben Goldberg** produces a hallucinogenic tone before the ensemble swings into a hot gypsy jazz rhythm, featuring Burr’s sparkling keys and **Steven Bernstein’s** muted trumpet adding counterpoint to Walker’s laid-back vocal and quiet, scatted improvisations.

“**Tonight You Belong to Me**” was a hit for sister act Patience and Prudence in 1956, but it was written in 1926 for Gene Austin by Billy Rose and Lee David. The opening verse is rarely sung, but Walker does it here, with Burr’s country jazz piano and **Scott Nygaard’s** gently trilling mandolin giving the music the feel of a hot Saturday evening at a swinging barn dance. Walker’s lilting ornamentations give the lyric a sly, seductive feeling. “The lyrics are really pretty brazen,” Walker remarks. “I know you belong to somebody new, but tonight you belong to me,’ and there’s an ambiguous aspect as well. You’re not really sure if this scenario will end in pleasure or pain.”

The oldest song on the record is “**I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles,**” a disconsolate waltz that, though it dates back to 1918, conveys a sense of pathos and longing that is timeless. Walker’s wistful vocal is full of whispered blue notes and delicate harmonies with Burr’s crystalline piano, Evan’s sonorous bass, Nygaard’s mellow acoustic guitar, and **Philip Worman’s** sighing cello offering subtle support.

Richard Thompson’s “**I Wish I Was a Fool for You**” gets a subtle driving folk/rock arrangement with Burr’s driving piano augmented by his work on the Hammond organ. Drummer **Jason Lewis** plays with the time to complement Walker’s aching vocal. Nygaard’s lilting guitar introduces the Rogers and Hart standard “**Isn’t It Romantic?**” Evans composed a swooning, lush string arrangement to harmonize with Walker’s shimmering, soulful vocal. The set ends on a jaunty note with “**Lullaby in Ragtime,**” a tune that evokes the feeling of a late night, sleepy New Orleans jam session. It features Walker’s most sultry vocal, with Goldberg on clarinet, Bernstein on slide trumpet, and the rhythmic magic of drummer Lewis.

Lissy Walker was born in Hollywood, but the family moved to Berkeley, CA, in the late 60s. She came of age in the 70s, an exciting musical time. Her parents played classical music in the house, but her grandparents, who lived upstairs, loved jazz and Big Band. “My grandfather played the organ and the trumpet, and my grandmother played the piano and loved to sing,” Walker says.

At age ten, Walker took classical piano lessons. “I loved playing **Bach** and **Mozart**, but I was *in love* with **Scott Joplin’s** ragtime. I asked my teacher if we could work on one of his tunes, but she was schooled in classical music only.” Undaunted, Walker bought a book of Joplin’s rags and taught herself. “I also loved singing along to records after school, especially **Ella Fitzgerald, The Andrew Sisters, Manhattan Transfer,** and **Harry Nilsson’s *The Point.***” She then discovered her grandparents’ sheet music in the piano bench. “There was an extensive collection of songs,” Walker says, “I started working on them and was delighted to find that I could accompany myself while singing.”

At **Berkeley High School**, Walker appeared in plays and musicals and toured Europe with the choir. She also attended the **Young Conservatory** at the **American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.)** after school and on weekends. “Acting was directly linked to singing for me,” says Walker. “I was singing in a variety of styles and venues—I then decided I wanted to sing with the acclaimed **BHS Jazz Band.**” She asked jazz director, **Phil Hardyman**, if she and her friends could sing three-part harmony swing songs with the ensemble, and he put together a jazz combo. “It was a very creative time and place,” Walker recalls.

Walker studied theater and voice at **UCLA** and graduated from the **Neighborhood Playhouse** in New York City, studying acting with **Sanford Meisner** and **Richard Pinter**. After graduation, Walker was a principal performer at the **Home for Contemporary Theater and Art**. She appeared in numerous productions, including *The School for Jolly Dogs*, an English Music Hall review, and Charles Mee's *The Imperialists at the Club Cave Canem*, which was picked up by **Joseph Papp's Public Theater** and featured in the *New York Times*.

After eight years in New York, Walker and her husband, cellist Philip Worman, moved back to San Francisco. She appeared in the award-winning productions of *Tom Jones* and *The Sea Plays*, and in **A.C.T.'s Long Day's Journey into Night**, one of her first dramatic roles after a lifetime of musicals and comedy.

Following the birth of her two children, Walker thought about returning to the stage, but singing provided a more immediate path to personal and artistic satisfaction. "I feel like I can get the same feeling within the framework of a song and I'm not at the mercy of someone else's vision. Songs are like little plays. Singing is more personal and I love the emotional immediacy of popular song."

Walker immersed herself in jazz and learned how to write charts, arrange, and approach a song from a jazz singer's perspective. She soon refined her unique style, adding acoustic guitar and cello to her sets, bringing all the elements of the music she loved together. Audiences were moved by her interpretations of the melancholic melodies of **Irving Berlin** to the honky-tonk rhythms of **Randy Newman**. Fellow musicians encouraged Walker to record soon after she began singing again.

A meeting with **Jon Evans** led to *Life Is Sweet*, and he returned to co-produce *Wonderland*, another collection marked by the band's subtle virtuosity and Walker's deep, simmering vocals, delivering an album that continuously reveals emotional and musical intensity.

Lissy Walker: *Wonderland*

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