



Judy Henske: Funny Girl

Bilger, Audrey; Pawelski, Cheryl. **Rockgrl** 57 (Fall 2005): 22-23.

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Abstract (summary)

After two records, she bounced from label to label in a series of solo and collaborative efforts, releasing six albums on four different labels through 1971, then releasing nothing until Loose in the World in 1999. During this hiatus, she continued writing songs that were recorded by Bette Midler; Crosby, Stills and Nash; and Henske's husband and songwriting partner Craig Doerge. When the Kingston Trio broke up and Dave Guard wanted a girl singer, I joined up with him, but he moved to Australia after a year with the Whiskey Hill Singers.

Full Text

Headnote

Judy Henske defies classification. In the 1960s, producer Jack Nitzsche dubbed her "Queen of the Beatniks," a moniker that rightly glorified, but never fully described Henske, whose music embodies elements of every genre, and whose performances include generous doses of story-telling and comedy.

With a delightfully dark, frequently bawdy sense of humor and a size extra-large voice, Henske is a dynamic performer. She stands tall-almost six foot one-with an Amazonian intensity that made her an odd figure among '60s folkies and still sets her apart today.

Henske's discography tells one side of her story and indicates why she may be less well-known than she deserves. She was signed to Elektra in 1963 at the age of 23. After two records, she bounced from label to label in a series of solo and collaborative efforts, releasing six albums on four different labels through 1971, then releasing nothing until Loose in the World in 1999. Despite early success, Henske stopped performing for almost three decades to raise a daughter. During this hiatus, she continued writing songs that were recorded by Bette Midler; Crosby, Stills and Nash; and Henske's husband and songwriting partner Craig Doerge. She recently released She Sang California on her own label, Fair Star Music.

You originally planned to call your new record Big Judy. Why did you decide against it?

I asked the fans on the Web site, and they said, "No, that means you're fat. It's got a bad connotation." I said, "But I am Big Judy. I don't have to be fat." It's like Big Country, that's how I thought of it, big in that way.

Does your size have any affect on your performance style?

As a girl singer, I have been competing with pretty, small women, and I'm not a pretty, small woman. I'm a big, rough woman. I think I'm goodlooking, though. I'm a good-looking big, rough woman. [People] confuse the word "gender" with the word "sex." Sex is male and female, gender is feminine and masculine. I'm not particularly feminine, but I have a lot of femaleness, so I have more sex than I have gender.

When you performed on the folk program Hootenany in the '60s, you were often much taller than the men.

That was clear, wasn't it? I had to hunch over to sing into [the microphone]. They were just regular-sized guys, and I was Judy. I was wearing high heels because I thought, "Why should I wear flats?" I had gotten to the point at which I didn't care any more. I thought, "I am not going to look small and feminine." I decided to become me. I was made fun of a lot when I was growing up because I was so big.

I needed to make fun of myself before anyone else could. Humor protects you from other people. I think of it like a Jordan almond: sweet, hard and crunchy on the outside, but inside there's something else entirely, and it protects you.

You're probably one of the few people who could offer up extended comic introductions to murder ballads.

The reason I do that is because I am an equilibrist. If I sing a song in which someone gets beaten to death and thrown in a river, I can't leave that alone. At the beginning I have to say something funny. I don't want people to be too depressed. In a way what I do is disarm everything I sing.

How did you get signed?

I was sitting with my banjo at Cosmo Alley, a little jazz club in downtown Hollywood, and Herbie Cohen asked, "Can you play that?" His singer had gotten sick. It was like a movie. When the Kingston Trio broke up and Dave Guard wanted a girl singer, I joined up with him, but he moved to Australia after a year with the Whiskey Hill Singers. Then I was at liberty. I worked at Herbie's again, and Jac Holzman [founder of Elektra records] asked me to make a record.

Have you always felt free to perform whatever you want?

Once somebody offered me a song that became a country hit by another person. They had it all prepared-the arrangement, the range I was supposed to sing in, the whole thing. I said to my manager, "How can I ever do this? This is a piece of shit," He said, "Yeah, but it's going to be a hit." I said, "But then where would I be?"

You know where you'd be? You'd have to do that over and over again. I'd rather die. I said no, and they gave it to the other person, and she had a hit. If it's a hit, there goes the rest of your life, kiddo. If it's not you, then you have to become this other thing. You'd better be jolly well sure you're doing what you want.

Why did you end up taking a break from performing for so long?

When we were doing Rosebud, I had to put Kate into daycare. One day we picked her up and she was crying. "They hit me, hit my hands," she said. Her hands were red across her knuckles. The daycare people told me it was because she would not take a nap. I said, "If I could bust you people and put you all in prison, I would." It was too much to have a child that somebody might hurt. I had to watch her, so I stopped singing.

Did you go into hibernation?

I lived a different life. I wasn't hibernating. I was just not being a singer. I wrote. Craig is in show business and was around Jackson [Browne], Crosby, Stills and Nash and James Taylor, so I never lost track of what was going on.

Then Kate got married and I went back to work. Isn't that funny? She went through college, grad school, and I still sat on my butt. When she got married, I thought, "Okay then, she's in the world."

Is that when you decided to make another record?

Yeah, but the hardest thing wasn't writing. I could already write, but I couldn't sing anymore. I didn't have my chest voice at all. I had to get my voice back. I had a head voice that sounded like Joan Baez, but I couldn't sing the blues.

It's ironic in a metaphorical sense that you had to get your voice back.

I know. I had to find singers who were in my range, and then I would sing along with their records. I sang along with Delia Reese and Gladys Knight, who were also in my range. I sang Judy Garland, even though she wasn't in my range because she was a wonderful performer. I would go through a cheat book and sing 35 songs a day. Your voice gets roughened up enough that it's interesting.

The song "Maurice Maurice" is wickedly funny. We love the part about the mother who has plastic surgery to look like her recently deceased husband and the line, "We had barely got back from Dad's funeral / And there he was again. "

Isn't it great? People think it's so terrible. They hate that the person gets plastic surgery to look like the father. Sometimes it's so hilarious to me, I can hardly sing it. Kids like it, too. They think it's bold and daring. Somebody called and said, "My eight-year-old son just loves that. He keeps putting it on all the time, listening and laughing, and I don't know if it's good or bad for him." I said, "You know, it's always good if you laugh."

Sidebar
If it's a hit, there goes the rest of your life, kiddo. If it's not you, then you have to become this other thing.

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