



Story Jane Cornwell

The pianist tinkling the ivories in London's Claridge's hotel has no idea who the guest in Suite 301 is. This is probably a good thing; news that Diana Krall is in the building may well make the tinkler's fingers seize in the middle of *Against All Odds*. Notes waft blandly around the art deco surrounds; diners chat, clink glasses and dab at their mouths, oblivious. Waiting there, I imagine someone else making music in the corner, someone who befits the glamorous decor. Someone from the golden era of recording, perhaps. Nat King Cole. Louis Armstrong. Billie Holiday. Or even Krall herself. Blonde hair in a pompadour, long legs in nylon stockings, wielding that emotive, lived-in alto.

But since the Canadian jazz superstar has just finished a clutch of European dates, and since she is pregnant with her first child (the baby is due in December), it is pretty unlikely that she'll sashay in, elbow the pianist off the bench and launch into a selection of standards from her new, tenth album, *From This Moment On*.

More's the pity: with title borrowed from Cole Porter's romantic ode to great expectations ("No more blue songs/Only whoop-dee-do songs"), the album is a swinging triumph. Buoyed by her illustrious trio – Anthony Wilson on guitar, Jeff Hamilton on drums, John Clayton on upright bass – and the Clayton/Hamilton Jazz Orchestra, Krall plays and emotes her way through 11 tunes that, taken together, form an upbeat, cohesive whole. I'm happy, she seems to be saying. And these days, more often than not, she is.

"Isn't it a lov-e-ly day ... to be ... CAUGHT ... in the rain." In Suite 301, Krall sings me the last line of her slowed-down version of the Irving Berlin standard. She is thrilled with the way the song turned out; everything from the solos (alto sax and trumpet) to her own intuitive timing make it a mini-masterpiece.

"I played *Isn't It A Lovely Day* for a friend, who thought it was just like a 1958 Capitol Records hit," she says in her low, mellifluous voice. "For me it's all about tempo. I know in my head what the right tempo is for the phrasing, but that track was so hard to do. I was like, 'Please God, will the tempo please not move! May we all be relaxed and let it flow!' It ended up being such a wonderful, natural thing. I listen to it now and go, 'Wow!'"

The 41-year-old singer and pianist (or if you like, pianist and singer) smiles, sips her Earl Grey tea. "Yours okay?" she asks, nodding at the cup she made me earlier. Makeup-free, in snakeskin pumps and a blue, rather matronly shift dress by the designer Marni ("They tend to do dresses that are forgiving"), her only jewellery a slim wedding band and a tiny diamond cross on a chain around her neck, this is not the Diana Krall of the glossy photo shoots and airbrushed album sleeves. The one whose chic look (Diana in tulle by moonlight; Diana barefoot in a ballgown on the shore; Diana in little black dress at her piano) put the va-va-voom back into jazz in the late 1990s. This Diana Krall has circles under her eyes, a noticeable bump under the Marni and a resentment at being pigeonholed as a glamourpuss. "It's ridiculous," she says, tut-tutting.

She might have performed at the White House (for then president Bill Clinton) and have won a Grammy (for 2000's string-drenched *When I Look in*

Your Eyes), but Krall maintains an ambivalent attitude to fame. The music is what matters, she insists. She was born to it: growing up in the small city of Nanaimo, British Columbia (on the eastern side of Vancouver Island), the daughter of a record-collecting, stride-piano-playing father, the young Diana was practising along to Fats Waller as soon as her feet reached the pedals. The likes of Bing Crosby and Ella Fitzgerald seduced her early. While her peers got into pop and rock, Krall – give or take a fondness for *Crocodile Rock*-era Elton John – remained an unrepentant swinger.

At 15 she was playing piano bars in Vancouver. At 17 she won a scholarship to study piano at the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston, where she was "discovered" by two of her heroes, jazz drummer Jeff Hamilton (now in her trio) and jazz bassist Ray Brown (a former husband of Ella Fitzgerald). At 19, on Brown's recommendation, she dropped out of college and apprenticed herself in Los Angeles to jazz pianist Jimmy Rowles, who used to accompany Billie Holiday. Rowles wasn't too keen, initially. "When I drove my crappy little Toyota Tercel down to LA and went and knocked on Jimmy's door, he said he didn't teach, that he didn't know what to teach. But I wouldn't take no for an answer. I needed to study with the jazz old guys, listen to their stories."

On a subsequent scholarship to New York, she decided to try singing as well. She sang what she knew – the popular standards – pulling them apart and putting them back together, finding new meaning and emotional power in each ("They're like Shakespeare's sonnets, beautiful forever"). She found another mentor in veteran ▶

No more done-me-wrong songs: with her third wedding anniversary and her first baby on the way, whoop-dee-do tunes are the order of the day for jazz diva Diana Krall.

out of
the blues

song stylist Rosemary Clooney (aunt of George), whose advice – “Just be yourself” – Krall took to heart. Her 1994 international debut, *Stepping Out*, walloped critics ready to dismiss her as yet another pretty but bland cocktail singer; most changed their minds moments into the opening track, a cover of Louis Jordan’s *Is You Is Or Is You Ain’t My Baby?*

Still, for every critic who swooned, there was another who complained that Krall’s voice was too tense, too forced, too unsuited to the relaxed sensation of swing. The more popular she became, the more her detractors railed. Her music was dismissed as jazz-lite. Smooth jazz. Jazz for a mainstream who didn’t “get” the hardcore jazz of Coltrane, Monk and Mingus. Or not even jazz at all – which is fine by her. Krall hates labels, loathes feeling boxed in. She considers herself an artist first and foremost, as well as a work in progress, much as does Elvis Costello, her husband of nearly three years. (Costello has long thrown himself into projects outside the confines of rock’n’roll; he is currently working on an opera about Hans Christian Andersen.)

“It’s amazing how people don’t want you to change,” Krall says. “How if they love you for one thing, they don’t want you to try and do something different. When I did a record with strings it was like, ‘Oh, you’re doing a record with strings now!’ When I did *The Girl in the Other Room* [the 2004 release that featured six tunes co-written with Costello], it was, ‘You’ve abandoned standards!’ Then, this week, journalists are saying, ‘We thought you were just going to be a writer!’” Krall rolls her eyes. Not one to suffer fools, though she suffers them a little more than her notoriously prickly husband, it was her knee-jerk response to silly statements like these – and other, more personal questions – that won her the nickname “Diana Growl” when she toured Australia in 2003.

“That was a terrible time,” she says, shuddering. “My mum had died and I was totally freaked out and I didn’t want to talk about it.” Adella Krall passed away in May 2002, six years after being diagnosed with an incurable cancer, and four years after having undergone a bone marrow transplant.

“My mother’s diagnosis coincided with a time when my career was taking off. For a while she was well and we had a lot of intense joy as a family. I was just back in Paris and stayed at the same hotel where my mother and father and I spent Christmas 2001. I was recording [Krall’s 2002 live album] *Live In Paris* and, yeah, it was a really joyful time. I must admit that I found it difficult staying there again,” she adds softly. “I was a bit traumatised.”

In the immediate aftermath of her mother’s death Krall was comforted by Rosemary Clooney, who also had cancer. Five weeks later, Clooney died. Three weeks after that, so did Ray Brown. It was a triple whammy that left Krall devastated. “I’m a worrier by nature,” she says, “and have been ever since I was a little girl. And when I was in that hotel I felt that because something bad had happened, and then had happened again, and then again ...” She trails off, eyes wet, puts her hand over her bump. But hasn’t she also said that although grief can blindsight you, although awful things will always happen, you can at least choose your response? “Yes, exactly,” she says. “You have to learn to let go of feeling fearful and trust that things won’t always go wrong.”



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KRALL WAS GOING OUT WITH A SCREENWRITER

when she and Costello met to co-present a category at the Grammy Awards in Los Angeles in February 2002. She was nervous; he calmed her down. They became friends and along the way fell in love.

“He came out to Sydney to see me,” she says with a smile. They began collaborating on what grew into six new, highly personal songs about grief and emotional rebuilding, songs that became the artistic core of *The Girl In The Other Room*. (“That was a very important record for me. I couldn’t have done this record without delving that deeply into personal growth.”)

In December 2003 they were secretly married at the estate of their friend, Sir Elton John, in Windsor, England. It was Krall’s first marriage and the third for Costello, 52. “I’d become used to thinking of myself as someone who’d have her career, friends and family. Her single person’s life,” she said later. “I wasn’t sure that marriage was going to happen for me.”

Certainly the teenage Krall who had hummed along to Elvis Costello and the Attractions’ 1977 hit *Watching The Detectives* never imagined she’d end up marrying the knock-kneed singer in the ill-fitting suit. But then neither did the Krall who was given Elton John’s *Blue Moves* album for Christmas 1976, who used to play *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* on the family Wurlitzer (“Elton’s partner, David Furnish, finds that hilarious”), think that one day she’d be mates with Mr Crocodile Rock himself.

Theirs is a friendship built on mutual admiration: “Diana takes a song that you’ve heard a million times before as if you’re hearing it for the first time and understanding it properly, too,” Sir Elton has said. Krall grins when she calls him her fairy godfather. “He is totally supportive of other artists,” she says. “He has albums couriered over to me with little notes saying, ‘You have to listen to this.’”

Last April, both Elton and Elvis joined a lineup

The attractions ... Krall with husband Elvis Costello. Their friendship turned into a love affair and artistic collaboration.

that included Krall, Tony Bennett, Sarah McLachlan and (as a speaker) Bill Clinton in an annual benefit concert for the Vancouver General Hospital’s Leukemia/Bone Marrow Transplantation Program. “We started it for my mother, who was such a genuine, loving, funny, inspiring person,” says Krall.

“This year’s benefit reminded me of the Rat Pack. I mean, here I am playing piano while Elton and Elvis are singing *Making Whoopee* like Dean and Frank, and Tony Bennett is singing *The Lady is a Tramp* with everyone. Bill Clinton said it was one of the best musical evenings he’s been to. And we raised \$2.6 million!”

Celebrity has its advantages, she adds, then wonders if she’s talking too much. “It’s probably the caffeine,” she mutters, staring at her cup. She shifts a little in her seat – her lower back is sore, and her breasts are killing her – and leans back to stare at the ceiling before resuming. “I found out I was pregnant around the anniversary of my mother’s death. Life and death,” she sighs. “How can you not believe in something when things like this happen?”

Her dad is finally doing okay, she says. She sees him whenever she’s at home in British Columbia, where she and Costello have a house (they live most of the year in New York). “I lose myself in the outdoors when I’m home. I ski, ride horses, hike through mud. And whales ... our house has a waterfront view and I’ve seen pods of killer whales go by and it’s just the most beautiful thing.”

Costello now shares his wife’s passion for collecting First Nations artwork by the Haida, the indigenous people of the region; Krall is close to internationally renowned Haida artist and shaman Robert Davidson, who designed the couple’s wedding bands – and from whom she and her sister are learning a more inclusive and spiritual way of being. “It’s too complicated to talk about right now. But [Haida beliefs are] very connected with the earth and nature. I grew up in the Lutheran church [where her dad played the organ and her mum hollered loudly in the choir] with spirituality and community and people gathered together to sing. It was a good upbringing, but that kind of separateness troubles me. I love the freedom [of Haida spirituality]. I look forward to teaching my child or children about that.”

Aware of how easily this information can be misconstrued, she says it’s something she rarely brings up in interviews. “But I’m a very intuitive person. It used to trouble me to be so intuitive, but now I know how to deal with it. If someone’s energy doesn’t feel right, I’m like ‘Whoa!’”

So where does Diana Krall – artist, art collector, spiritual being, non-glamourpuss, wife and mother-to-be – feel that she has developed the most? Why, in the music, of course. “During the last few weeks it has become very clear to me that I have a real comfort in what I am doing. Not the sort of comfort that means I am not going to move forward anymore, but a sort of comfortable frustration.”

“It’s a really good feeling,” she adds with a smile. “I haven’t gotten there yet but I’m still striving. And yeah, I’m really enjoying it. Really enjoying it a lot.” ■

From This Moment On (Verve Records, distributed by Universal) is released September 9.