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AL JARREAU TOYS WITH BLENDING GENRES AND STARTING A RECORD LABEL AS NEW WAYS TO EXPRESS HIMSELF

Expansion Plans

By BILL KOHLHAASE
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Spring is the season of renewal, and indeed, the current season finds Al Jarreau moving on and heading out.

Having finished nearly three months on Broadway as the Teen Angel in "Grease," the singer has started a tour that will take him across the United States and to most of Europe's major jazz festivals. He'll be at the Orange County Performing Arts Center on Saturday.

Jarreau is also pulling together a final album for his longtime label, Warner Bros., a greatest-hits compilation that will include a handful of new material too. Meanwhile, he is thinking about starting his own record company. It's just one of a host of projects that will, he said, bring out other sides of Al Jarreau.

He talked about the possibilities during a phone conversation earlier this week at a rehearsal break at producer-keyboard player George Duke's studio in Hollywood, where he has been preparing the next album's new material.

"The idea," he said, "is to put me and what I do in other musical settings, and to let those settings affect how I perform. Doing a Brazilian album is one idea, working with a big band is another.

"Also, I'm thinking of what it would be like for Al Jarreau to do appearances with the Boston Pops, the London Symphony Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony and the like. It would be a whole new repertoire that people have never heard me do."

Yet another dream is to forge a marriage between contemporary music and opera.

"I'm talking with a friend, the German opera singer Gregor Precht, and his thing is expanding opera beyond the typical fine-jewelry, tuxedo-sporting night at the opera and doing it in other kinds of settings with other kinds of music, available to all kinds of people."

Dealing in multiple genres is nothing new to Jarreau, the only singer to win Grammys for jazz, pop and rhythm and blues.

"People are really capable of enjoying a broader variety of music from moment to moment than they are given credit for," he said. "We tend to think that if someone's a country fan that never-the-rwain-shall-mee! with jazz. But that's B.S. Ray Charles proved that long ago."

Jarreau broadened his own role as singer this year by appearing in his first Broadway musical. Assuming the Teen Angel role was a challenge.

"The first week was sheer terror, but after the first month, I got things under control and knew where it was I was going and I began to relax a little bit. This was a part of me—interacting on stage with others, playing a character—that I had never really experienced before."

The director allowed Jarreau to bring his own personality to the role.

"My part was to encourage the lead not to leave high school. But they gave me the room to expand the part and lean on the message the way that Al Jarreau would. They allowed me to open the part up and bring in all the vocalese, all the instrumental kinds of things that mark the Al Jarreau thumbprint."

His own schooling culminated with a master's in vocational rehabilitation from the University of Iowa. But after moving to San Francisco, he realized he'd been following the wrong path.

"I discovered that this thing of being a vocational rehabilitation counselor, dealing with as many clients as a freshman counselor has to deal with, wasn't working out with me. I was getting nowhere fast. One spring morning, I decided that it was just time to move on."

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Luckily, he had a vocation to fall back on. As a newcomer to San Francisco, he had been taken by friends to an afternoon jam session at the now-defunct Half Note club. The piano player was George Duke.

"I sang a tune or two with him, and the club owner asked me to come back every weekend. Things evolved with George over the years, of course, but there was a musical-love relationship that happened immediately. George and I share many of the same musical roots. I would call the tunes, and he would start to play."

Jarreau's performance in Orange County will (like his upcoming album) present an overview of his career with a few new twists. The singer, whose expansive range and wide array of tonal qualities has prompted reviewers to call him a "one-man orchestra," realizes that he demands a lot of his voice.

"When the throat is taxed and tired from belting out tunes, it's difficult to sing light and pretty. The main thing is to stay healthy and eat right and rest well. I try not to do tours that are overtaxing. . . [I take] time between performances to rest. There's just so much you can require a throat to do."

* Al Jarreau sings Saturday at the Orange County Performing Arts Center, 600 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa, 8 p.m. \$23-\$45. (714) 556-2787.

Photo:

"Doing a Brazilian album is one idea, working with a big band is another," says Al Jarreau.

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